



HESTER

MORLEY'S

PROMISE

STRETTON




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HESTER MORLEY'S

PROMISE.

BY

HESBA STRETTON,

author of "The Doctor's Dilemma," "Bede's Charity," &c., &c.

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CHAPTER I.

JOHN MORLEY, BOOKSELLER.

LITTLE ASTON is one of those small midland towns, lying in the midst of an agricultural district, which offer no attraction to tourists, and where very few events seem to happen. Every family in it, even to the lowest classes, possesses a staid respectability and decency, which is chiefly the heritage of those who live in isolated places, divided from the busier, and perhaps the more wicked, world by a girdle of corn-fields and meadows. The population cannot be more than five thousand, which in these days constitutes little more than a family party, whose members must be very closely allied. A large proportion of the townspeople consist of professional men, and people with means, who keep up the tone of its society. The grosser vices, if there be any, hide themselves diligently from the microscopic scrutiny of the town. Murder has never stained its precincts with blood ; suicide is almost unheard of ; intrigue is unsuspected. There are scandals, but scandals of the gentler kind, such as one might whisper of one's own mother's son. From day to day, and from year to year, its narrow stream of life flows in commonplace channels, seldom quickened into rougher and swifter currents. There are births, deaths, and marriages ; old men retiring from business, and young men attempting small innovations ; but the town of Little Aston is always very orderly, and strictly respectable.

Some years ago the centre of respectability was the Market Square, and to dwell elsewhere was to be a grade or two lower in society, and to be inadmissible to the selecter circle. But the next best place was Chapel Street, opening out of the north-west corner of the Square. It was narrow, and very dull, even upon market days ; the dullest street in the town. The shops were dark and dingy, and about half-way along it, they gave place to small, poor houses, built capriciously, each one of differing height and size. Nearly at the end stood a large and ugly chapel, with a pretentious portico, supported by four square pillars of red brick, and surmounted by a pediment and architrave of blue and yellow tiles. This chapel gave its name to the street.

A few houses distant from the entrance into the Square stood a very old and very dingy dwelling, which had undergone but little alteration from the date of its erection, a century and a half before. Not that there was any of the picturesqueness of antiquity about it ; its aspect was only gloomy and weather-beaten, the windows being of small panes of discolored glass, and its walls blackened by smoke and age. The roof formed three gables, and the moss and house-leek grew along the gutters, and choked up the water-pipes. It was a large building, occupying more basement than would have sufficed for two handsome modern houses. It was on the north side of the street, which the sun never gladdened, and looked as if a perpetual cloud overshadowed it. Whether the gloom was within or without one could scarcely tell. The street was narrow, and the side pavement exceedingly so ; yet the old house thrust upon it two ancient bow windows, with casements painted black, and small dark panes, through which a passer-by with good sight might decipher the titles of long rows of books, the bindings and lettering

of which were faded by damp, rather than by excess of light. The books were dry, judged by modern taste. They were certainly old, and mostly theological ; with here and there a lighter volume of religious biography. Latin and Greek classics might have been found among them. Between the two windows was a door, always closed, but which rang a bell as it opened ; and the black lintel above it bore, in dim and tarnished letters, the words "John Morley, Bookseller." Within, the shop was always dusky, partly because of the books filling the windows ; and partly because of its northern frontage ; a cool and pleasant shade in summer, but in winter a very den of chill and darkness. As you opened the heavy door, and entered the shop to the tinkle of a noisy bell, John Morley himself would step down into it from some apartment beyond, and meet you face to face. It was less like addressing a tradesman behind his counter, than the meeting of friends or acquaintances. Most of his customers shook hands with him.

At the first glance it would have been said that John Morley was a grave and bookish man ; at the second, that he was solemn ; at the third, that he was sorrow-stricken. Some souls have a vast capacity for sorrow, and drink it in as a parched land drinks in water. There was no glimmer of sunshine about him any more than about his dwelling. Like it, he was stationed on the northern side of life, where no laughter or splendor of sunlight could fall upon him. Involuntarily, every voice was lowered to a subdued and respectful tone. Not a sound from the rest of the premises penetrated to the dusky and quiet shop ; and when John Morley bowed out his customer, and closed the door as upon some departing guest, the little bell rang loudly, like one jingling to the hard pull of a schoolboy in an empty house.

The rest of the dwelling consisted of a number of half-furnished rooms, with steps down or steps up into them, as the fashion is in old buildings ; with low, long casements, high and narrow doors, stained ceilings, and half-wainscoted walls. The windows at the back looked upon an enclosed yard, part of which had, a long time ago, been planted as a garden. A few melancholy lilacs and thin privet bushes still sucked a feeble life out of the sooty mould, and sent up slender black branches and a handful of pale leaves, to catch any stray sunbeams which might shine over the surrounding walls. There was a rambling range of outbuildings, including a stable filled to the rafters with rubbish ; above which was a small room with a shelving roof, which was approached by an outside staircase. A sad and sombre little room, with dingy ivy-leaves growing round the door, and tapping at the dusty panes of its lattice window, as if in parody of ivied doors and windows in the country. This room—nobody knew why—bore the name of the nursery ; though no children, within the memory of man, had ever played in it.

About a mile from Little Aston stood Aston Court, a handsome, bran new, desirable family mansion, with pleasure-grounds, conservatories and gardens, all surrounded by a fine, well-timbered park. The old Court had been bought and pulled down ten years ago by David Waldron, Esq., M. P., a famous man among the dissenters, and naturally the great man of the chapel at the end of Chapel Street. The portico had been built in honor of him. The church at Little Aston—by which we mean that “congregation of faithful men” worshipping in the dissenters’ chapel—had been small and of no repute, before the advent of Mr. Waldron. It had been looked upon as low and vulgar, fitted only for the poorer classes. There had been but one member of any standing, of any education or

learning, belonging to it,—a man who had the original tongues on his lips more aptly than the rector himself, and who knew the whole origin, motive, and history of dissent. That man was John Morley.

If these two, David Waldron, M. P., and John Morley, bookseller, had met each other in the aisles of the parish church, they would have kept to their own legitimate spheres, and been no more to one another than the squire and his tradesman. But they were brought together on the democratic platform of a church-fellowship, in which all the members were professedly equal. They called themselves brethren. All the rest of the brethren were content to look up to Mr. Waldron from a long way off, as a brother far above them ; and they were quite willing that he who helped to rule the nation should rule their church absolutely. But John Morley was a deacon; like Mr. Waldron ; he was also a trustee, like Mr. Waldron. He knew what equality and fraternity meant. If Mr. Waldron had political influence, John Morley had literary influence ; for he could use his pen well in defence of their sect and its tenets. These two men held a somewhat uneasy position with regard to one another. John Morley was the Mor-decai in the gate ; but let it be understood that Mr. Waldron was a very worthy Haman, a really good man, only a little jealous of the homage and authority he believed to be his due.

CHAPTER II.

A YOUNG STEPMOTHER.

THE room behind John Morley's shop was spacious enough ; but it had a low ceiling crossed by a massive beam, and it was lighted only by a long low casement of small panes and thick woodwork, opening upon the mournful garden at the back. It looked like an addition to the crowded shop in front ; for the walls were lined with shelves closely packed with books, dull and dark in their bindings, with narrow strips of crimson baize, which had long lost their bright tint, nailed along the edge of each shelf. The furniture was heavy and old ; the carpet threadbare and faded. No curtains shut out the black night when it pressed against the window outside. On the table, during the daytime, there usually lay a pile of business books, a ledger, a day-book, which no neat, meddling hand of woman moved from time to time. No woman's work lay side by side with them, neither sewing nor knitting ; such as had once, for a brief space of two years, sometimes ruffled John Morley a little by its disorder and interference with his own more important occupations. He had remembered them often, when they could come in his way no more, with a pang too sharp to be shown by any other sign than the deepening shadow under his eyes, and the threads of white growing plainer in his dark hair. In this room, haunted by memories becoming more and more dreamlike, John Morley had spent

his evenings alone, without companions, and wishing for none, having his books and his remembrances only ; the latter dying away softly and slowly, as if they had merely lingered for a while out of pure good nature, before leaving him to his solitude.

This room was not, however, yet solitary at six o'clock one winter's evening ; though John Morley was occupied with a customer in his shop. It was unlighted, except by a good fire burning brightly in the grate. Stretched at full length upon the hearth lay a little girl, reading by the fire-light, her face glowing partly with the heat, and partly with the interest excited by her book. Her hair, cut short over the forehead, had been flaxen, then golden, and was now taking a sunny chestnut shade of brown. The eyes were large, well opened, and clear, with that peculiar gaze of wonder and innocence which some children's eyes still retain at the age of ten years. In spite of the glow upon the face, it was grave and sad—as sad as a child's face can be. You might have seen, looking at her closely, and reading rightly the expression of the eyes and mouth with its sweet and pliant lips, that this was a child whose life would be most completely shaped and colored by the temperaments of those around her. She could never be childishly gay while others were suffering ; nor grave in the presence of mirth. By a more direct necessity of her nature than most others possess, she would weep with those that weep, and rejoice with those that rejoice. Only encircle her with gladness, and she would be the most joyous among the happy ; here she was the most subdued among her mournful and sad surroundings.

This child caught at last the sound of animated voices, and lifted up her head, which had been bent over her book. A minute or two afterwards she crossed the room quietly to the door which connected it with the shop, and pushed

it open far enough to get a glimpse of the talkers. She could see her father's face, and she leaned forward more eagerly to look at it. She could hardly remember to have seen it without its profound and unbroken gloom, which never lightened when looking at her. But now the gloom was gone; the dark eyes glittered, the stern lips smiled, and the heavy eyebrows expanded with an unmistakable pleasure, as he gazed into the face turned towards him. This face the child could not see. The little solitary heart was as quickly troubled as the surface of a mountain tarn, which lies open to every breath that blows; and the tears came, she did not know why, into her eyes.

"Come in, and see my little girl now," said John Morley, in a tone which reached her ears.

The child shrank back shyly, and retreated to the hearth, reaching it just in time to turn, and front the stranger, who seemed to hesitate for a moment on the threshold of the comfortless and sombre room. The face was girlish and exceedingly pretty, set round with rich masses of fair hair, and lit up with blue eyes, which appeared to shine into the gloom, and disperse it. Her hesitation, if it were hesitation, was gone in an instant, and she crossed the floor with a light and eager step to the child, who waited timidly her approach. She laid her arm about her shoulders, and stooped down to kiss her cheek.

"What is your name, my dear?" she asked, in a gay young voice, which seemed to thrill through the child's sensitive frame.

"Hester Morley," she answered, speaking with quaint self-possession, and in measured tones: "what is your name, and where do you come from?"

"My name is Rose Mary," said the stranger, with a laugh breaking through the long, dull silence of the place,

with a promise of more music like it : "is it a pretty name, Hester?"

"I think so," replied the child after a moment's musing ; "does my father like it?"

"Oh you droll little creature!" exclaimed the girl, with a side-long glance at John Morley's radiant face. "I daresay he does, but I shan't ask him. How old are you, Hester?"

"I am nine years old," she said, sighing as if she had found the nine years a heavy burden ; "but you are older than me. How old are you, Rose Mary?"

"Oh, fie!" she cried, lowering her voice to a mock whisper, "you must never ask a lady her age ; that is always a secret. But I will tell you ; only you must never, never tell your papa. I am twenty-three years old ; positively an old woman. What an odd little mortal you are!"

The girl's manner had a light and graceful vivacity about it, full of charm and novelty to both of her grave listeners. She glanced again at John Morley with an expression which the child could not altogether comprehend, but which caused her to withdraw her hand from hers. John Morley came forward to the hearth, and laid his hand upon his little daughter's head.

"She has been sadly neglected," he said, looking fondly at the pretty girl beside him ; "but you will soon put her right : Hester, this lady has promised to be your mother."

Hester neither spoke nor moved, except that her clear eyes went quickly from the one face to the other ; but dwelt longest on the sombre, yet handsome, features most familiar to her.

"Don't you understand, my little Hester?" asked Rose, putting her hand through John Morley's arm, with

a coquettish and caressing gesture. "I am going to be your mamma, and take care of you."

"Yes, I understand," said the child, nodding her head, "you are going to be my stepmother. I have read all about it in books, and Lawson has told me about it. My real mother is dead; and my father is going to marry you. Yes, I know all about it. At first the stepmother is very kind, and is very fond of the children; but as soon as she has a baby of her own, she gets cross with the others, and everything is quite different."

John Morley's face flushed and darkened while his little daughter spoke in her measured tones; but Rose laughed her blithe and musical laugh again, and fell down on her knees before Hester, so as to bring her bright face on a level with the child's serious eyes.

"Look at me, little Hetty!" she cried, "just look at me. Do I look as if I could ever be cross or unkind? I'm not an old dragon of a stepmother. I shall want somebody to play with me, and your papa is years and years too old to play; but you and I will have fine games together. Oh! I am sure you will love me."

Hester gazed into the blue eyes of the girl with the deep, full, unconscious scrutiny of a child. The color came and went upon Rose's cheeks, and her lips pouted under this inspection. At last Hester half held out her small hand to her future stepmother, but checked herself, looking up to her father.

"Will it make you happy?" she asked with a grave air.

"Happier than I could tell you," answered John Morley passionately.

"I like you," she said, turning to Rose, "and we shall all be very happy—at first."

"No! no! no! Not at first; but always," cried the

girl, pressing kiss after kiss upon Hester's mouth, "we will love one another very dearly. You will be very glad to have me for your mamma?"

"Yes," answered Hester, still regarding her wistfully.

"And you promise me to be like my own daughter," continued Rose, half playfully. "for ever and ever? You will love, honor and succor me,—those are the words. I think,—as if I were your mother? When I am old and ugly, and nobody cares for me, you will care for me and never forsake me. Let me whisper a little secret, Hester. Your father will grow tired of me by-and-by, and we shall quarrel sometimes, and he will be very angry, and dreadfully cross; oh! so cross! But you must never get tired or cross with me. You must try to be exactly, just exactly, the same, as if you were born my own little girl. Will you promise me this, Hetty?"

She had spoken quite as much to John Morley as to Hester, with little coquettish charms and prettinesses which infatuated him. Hester's small, serious countenance deepened with thought, as she deliberated for a minute or two, gazing into her father's beaming face.

"Ought I to promise, father?" she asked at last.

"Certainly," answered John Morley; "she is to be your mother. You cannot be too good a child to her."

"God hears me promise," said the little girl, with simple solemnity; "I promise that I will be the same as if I had been born your daughter. I do promise it."

The gloomy room was silent again as Hester's childish voice ceased speaking; and the girl, who still knelt before her, grew pale, and the tears sprang into her eyes. John Morley also felt a passing chill and shadow of doubt crossing the brightness of his new joy. It was a gloomy niche in a gloomy household, which he was about to fill up with this gay and girlish creature. She glanced round

the room with its dingy rows of books, and peeped up into John Morley's face, already marked with austere lines ; and an involuntary shudder ran through her. But the next moment she laughed merrily. She embraced Hester with warmth, and held out her hand for John Morley to assist her in rising from her knees. It was one of her charming ways to seem to require help upon the slightest occasions.

"Thank you," she said, giving him a smile which made his heart beat quickly again with delight : "this is a queer child ! She made me feel, I can't tell you how solemn ! It was almost like being married, and hearing you vow all you will have to vow, you know. Are you quite sure you will be as much in earnest ?"

John Morley murmured a reply which could not reach Hester's ears.

"Well ! I must go now," she said. "I ought to be back already at that wretched school. Oh ! I am tired to death of it ; I long to get away from it. I believe I am only marrying you to be sure of never going back to it. There, now ! It is such a shame for a pretty girl like me, and I am a pretty girl you know, to be chained to a long table, hearing stupid dolts repeat stupid lessons. You will save my life, sir ; and I thank you a thousand times for it."

She curtseyed to him playfully, kissed Hester, and tripped away lightly out of the dark room, which seemed darker than ever after she had left it.

CHAPTER III.

PASTOR AND DEACONS.

WHEN John Morley returned to the sitting-room, he busied himself for some minutes in lighting the lamp, and setting everything into unbroken order, without once venturing to meet the eyes of his little girl, who still kept her station upon the hearth, watching him timidly but steadily. There was an undefined shyness and disquietude in his feelings towards her, which he could not well have explained to himself. He was accustomed to perform these small feminine duties of setting his room in order; but to-night he found himself embarrassed and awkward, with Hester's eyes upon him. After completing his methodical arrangements, he reached down a thick old volume from the bookshelves, and appeared to absorb himself in its contents.

But he was not reading. Hester was not to be deceived by the transparent artifice; and he felt it uneasily, and moved restlessly in his arm-chair, shading his eyes with his thin and scholarly hand. But all his features were kindled with a sunshine from within, brighter and stronger than a smile. For he would not smile; though he could not dim the light in his eyes, or make harsh again the strange softness which was smoothing away the rigid lines upon his face. Hester comprehended, but vaguely and as a child only, that a sad life, solitary and unnatural, was coming to an end, and that already the

light shone upon him from afar off. Her young heart was full of sympathy for him; but for some time she kept silence. Her short life had been full of lessons of reserve and taciturnity.

"Father," she said after a long while,—and he put down his hand, and looked across to her, where she sat in a large, deep, old arm-chair which had always been her mother's seat,—“I am not at all sorry to have a step-mother.”

The child's approbation had something quaint about it, but its oddity did not seem to strike her father; though he allowed a vivid smile to flit across his face as he heard it.

“Will it be long before you are tired of my step-mother?” inquired Hester.

“I shall never be tired of her!” he answered.

“But you are tired of me,” she continued, “and you are tired of my mother, or else you would not want to marry another wife. So I thought you would get tired of Rose Mary some day.”

“Hester,” said John Morley, his face over-clouded again, “I should never have been tired of your mother if she had lived.”

“But you tell me she does live,” persisted the child, “and Lawson says she comes back sometimes and walks about the house, though I cannot see her. Sometimes I think I can feel her kissing me very softly. Perhaps she is here this evening, and heard me promise to be like a daughter to my stepmother. Do you think she would like it, father?”

It was seldom that Hester spoke so freely and fluently; but this evening she was excited, her cheeks were crimson, and her large gray eyes were lit up. John Morley lowered his voice, and looked stealthily round the room as he answered her.

“My love, if your poor mother, who was very dear to me,—dearer than you can think,—could know of this, I am sure she would rejoice for your sake as well as mine. I am doing what I believe to be good for you as well as for myself. You need some woman to stand in a close relationship to you; and you will need it more as you grow older. Rose will be a second mother to you.”

“You are quite sure?” said Hester, with a childish love of reiterated and positive assurance.

“Quite sure,” he answered.

Perhaps he had had but little thought of his child till this evening, but now he began to believe that she had been his chief consideration; and as he turned back to his book, he said to himself several times, “Certainly, Rose will be a second mother to her.”

The silence which followed seemed scarcely like a silence to him; while the eager face of Hester was bent forward out of her great arm-chair, and her speaking eyes were fastened upon him. But he would give no attention to her eloquent looks; and in a few minutes she seemed aware of this, for she nestled down into her mother’s chair, as she might have nestled into her mother’s lap, and produced a book which she had kept wrapped up in her pinafore since the first interruption of her evening’s reading. John Morley and his daughter sat thus for half an hour, no sound reaching them from without; when the sharp tinkle of the shop-bell broke upon the stillness.

The persons who entered were two men, one old, the other elderly; unlike in feature, yet possessing an undefinable and subtle resemblance, which linked them together, and seemed also to link them to John Morley. It might have been that the order of their thoughts, and the convictions and conclusions at which they had arrived, had been the same; for the brain works out its own family

likenesses. It was evident that in some way or other they belonged to one class ; though John Morley, a handsomer man than either of the others, had also most the look of a scholar. The smallest, meekest, and eldest of the three men was distinguished as a minister by his dress, and the spotless whiteness of a large neckcloth, which served to withdraw the eye from dwelling upon his somewhat feeble features. The third was a robust, thick-set, elderly man, with a square and massive face, and with the air of one not much accustomed to be gainsaid, yet who would not altogether dislike to meet with a worthy antagonist.

"Brother Morley, we come as friends," said the minister.

With a courteous but formal bow John Morley ushered his guests into his sitting-room, and set chairs for them at the table ; as if they were about to sit in committee. The minister alone took any notice of Hester, who slipped down from her high seat upon their entrance, to offer them a shy welcome. She was used to listen earnestly to the discussions and controversies often held in her father's parlor.

This evening, however, there was some difficulty in introducing the subject of conversation, and when the minister broke silence it was in a faltering, apologetic voice.

"Brother Morley," he said, "cannot you divine the purport of our visit to-night?"

Over John Morley's face closed again much of the old gloom and austerity, as he looked from one to the other of his visitors ; gazing longest and hardest into the square set face of the younger man ; who regarded him, in his turn, with an unflinching judicial eye. The three men were three brothers doubtless, though the weakness and mercifulness of age were creeping over the eldest.

"We are come," he continued, deprecatingly, "because certain rumors have reached the ears of the church—"

"The church has many ears, and long ones," interrupted John Morley, with a grim smile, "but no doubt it has heard correctly. I apprehend the purport of these rumors."

"But brother," pursued the minister, in his most soothing accents, "it is not as if you were one of the unknown and inconsiderable members of the church. You are one of our chief men; a polished pillar in the temple. We come only to expostulate and beseech. It is written in the Scriptures, 'Thou shalt rebuke thy brother, and not suffer sin upon him.'"

The minister gazed at John Morley with mingled entreaty and sadness; but his companion, who was eager to pursue the assault with greater vigor, quickly broke the reverential pause which followed his quotation from the Bible.

"Come, brother Morley," he said, speaking as if he were a brother very far removed, "there's no need to beat longer about the bush. You are thinking of taking a second wife."

"That is essentially a domestic arrangement, Mr. Waldron," said John Morley, girding himself willingly for the contest: "the church has nothing to do with it. If it were a question of moral discipline the church must needs take note of it. But it has no voice in this matter; neither of assent, nor veto."

"Tush, brother!" answered Mr. Waldron, sharply: "we come but semi-officially. As your brethren, we are bound to watch your conduct; and if your choice had fallen upon a godly woman, not a word would have been said. But when we see one of ourselves about to form an ensnaring union, our constitution as a pure church

gives us the right, and lays it upon us as a duty, to warn, rebuke, and protest. 'This marriage ought not to be.'

"Yes, dear brother," said the minister, emboldened by Mr. Waldron's words, and pressing into the breach he had made, "the rule of the apostle is simple: 'Be ye not unequally yoked with unbelievers.'"

"The unbeliever," replied John Morley slowly, "signified to the early church the heathen and idolater. My future wife has been baptized, and is probably a communicant in the Church of England; therefore she cannot be called an unbeliever in that sense. But there is another saying of the apostle: 'The unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband.' I trust that this marriage may prove the entrance into a purer faith and truer creed for my wife."

There was a short silence again, while Mr. Waldron drew a well-worn Bible out of his pocket, and turned over its pages impatiently.

"Listen then, John Morley," he said; "in the thirteenth chapter of Nehemiah, beginning at the twenty-third verse, it is thus written:—

"'In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab. And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people.

"'And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves.

"'Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all

Israel : nevertheless, even him did outlandish women cause to sin.

“ ‘ Shall we then hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives ? ’ ”

Mr. Waldron read the passage with an evidently keen sympathy with the indignant governor ; and he looked hard into John Morley’s rigid face. The latter was not a man to yield quietly to the arbitrary rule even of Nehemiah the Tirshatha ; and he met the judicial frown bent upon him with cool composure.

“ Yet it had been permitted to the ancient Jews,” he said, “ under the rule of Moses, when they saw among the captives a damsel who pleased them, to take her to wife. Also David, the man after God’s own heart, took to wife Maacah, the daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur.”

“ And she bare him Absalom,” interrupted Mr. Waldron eagerly, “ the rebel and the assassin.”

The words were still upon his lips when there came a gentle tap at the door, and it was opened from without before John Morley could reach it. Rose appeared in the doorway ; and the minister and Mr. Waldron regarded her with surprised admiration. Again the sombre room seemed the brighter for her presence, and her clear, fresh young voice sounded pleasantly to their ears, after their own grave and deep tones.

“ I thought I should find you and Hetty alone, Mr. Morley,” she said ; smiles and blushes following one another closely upon her fair face ; “ and the bell did not ring, so I came straight on here. I have only left a book behind me, and I came back to fetch it.”

John Morley had approached her, and drawn her hand through his arm with an air of pride. Hester too, as if attracted by some irresistible charm, had descended from

her seat, and pressed close beside her. This girl possessed some fascination which drew all hearts to her ; though one might know lovelier women, wiser women, women tenfold better. The few words she had uttered were simple ; but like the foolish old songs with sweet tunes, which are heard by chance, and which one always wishes to hear once more, the three men were silent in the dull parlor when she ceased speaking, as if they waited to hear her voice again.

"This is the young lady who has consented to be my wife, Mr. Waldron," said John Morley, with an ill-concealed triumph in the effect her appearance had produced.

She stole a bashful look at the great man of the neighborhood, and curtsayed profoundly ; a boarding-school curtsy, learnt from a dancing-master, yet not without a certain diffident grace of its own. Mr. Waldron's face relaxed from its severity.

"Well brother," he said, with greater affability than before, "I wish you joy. And you also, my dear ; only we must make you one of ourselves as speedily as possible. We have just been speaking of it to John Morley. You must join the church, when you become his wife and the mother of this little girl."

"Yes, sir," murmured the girl, with charming shamefacedness ; while a shade of gravity clouded her sunny face for a moment. The old minister came forward, and addressed her in a tone of earnest solemnity.

"It will be the turning-point of your life," he said, "to become the wife of a godly man. Hitherto you have been wandering in the paths of vanity, but here you will be safely enfolded from the snares of this world. Morning, noon, and night a voice will sound in your ears : 'This is the way ; walk ye in it.' You will be snatched from the world, and gathered into the bosom of the church."

Once again the girl shivered, and looked in bewilder-

ment at the faces around her, wondering what their strange manner of greeting her might mean. But they had each put on a smile for her, and her nature was buoyant enough in itself to find complacency everywhere. John Morley's handsome face, moreover, wore an expression which any woman would be pleased to see in her future husband ; and she bridled her pretty head with a half-affected air of coquetry.

"I must go directly," she said in a girlish tone of importance ; "I have a hundred things to do yet to-night. There is my book on the table, Mr. Morley. Thank you very much. Good-night ; good-night. Good-bye, my little Hetty."

The door closed upon her, but the three men did not resume their seats, and Hester remained standing on the hearth, listening eagerly for their next words. The controversy had come to an unexpected end. Yet John Morley drew his little daughter within his arms, in an unaccustomed caress, and stroked down her tangled hair with a trembling hand.

"If the church be scandalized," he said, in a voice which he rendered steady by a great effort, "I can withdraw from it. There are other forms of worship and other sects not greatly differing from our own. My intended wife has been brought up in the Established Church. If it be necessary—"

The pause was of even more significance than the words ; and the old minister opened his eyes widely in unutterable astonishment. Mr. Waldron was the first to speak.

"It is a matter for expostulation," he said, "not of reproof or censure. Let each man act according to his own conscience. What do you say, Mr. Watson?"

"It is a question encompassed with difficulties," an

swered the minister diffidently ; "and every man must act according to his own inward light. But since brother Morley has gone so far as to promise marriage to this young creature, I do not see how he can conscientiously break off his covenant with her."

With that utterance the subject seemed settled. A few minutes later Mr. Waldron shook hands with John Morley with distant brotherliness, and went away with the minister. John Morley kissed his child, and bade her go to bed and dream of her new mother. But Hester loitered for a minute or two after he had reopened his large book, as if longing to say something to him. It was evidently an effort, an effort which she felt constrained to make ; and at last, when he believed himself to be alone, John Morley heard a small, timid voice speaking from the threshold, and saw Hester looking back at him with anxious eyes. What she had to say before she left him was simply this : "I hope you will not make God angry with you, father."

CHAPTER IV.

A MONOMANIAC.

ONE of the three gables of John Morley's house rose a story higher than the others, and under its pointed roof was a large attic, lighted by a great dormer window, which overlooked the neighboring buildings, and caught a glimpse of fields and woods beyond, with a range of distant hills, lying blue and cloudlike against the sky line. It was the pleasantest room in the dark old house. Beneath it lay some printing offices, black and grimy, containing ancient presses, covered over with dust and cobwebs; for John Morley had given up the printing business, which his predecessor had carried on, and the attic in the gable was his only workroom. He employed also but one workman, a stranger, who looked like a foreigner, and who had been passing through the town on the tramp the first week after his marriage with Hester's mother. The young wife had taken pity upon the footsore and famishing wanderer, and had persuaded her husband to give him a trial at his professed trade as a bookbinder. This trial was a complete success. He had learned his trade in Paris; his father having been an English artisan, who had married a Frenchwoman from Burgundy. The amount of work accomplished by this single man was marvellous, and the price he set upon it extravagant; yet such was the taste and beauty of the workmanship, that John Morley seldom received less for it than the high sum at which his binder

valued it. Throughout the whole county no binding was esteemed unless it had issued from John Morley's workshop.

The binding room, wherein this solitary artisan had worked for ten years, was not only light and sunny, but it was odorous with the pleasant scent of Russia leather and morocco, and in the summer with the flowers which he cultivated in boxes and pots about his window-sill. His press and work-table stood in the wide bay formed by the casement, where the daylight fell upon him, long after the court below and the sombre parlor were obscured in twilight. Over the rusty old grate, which was formed only of a few rude bars of iron fastened into the chimney jamb, stood a rack containing his tools for the printing of his ornamental devices upon the gold-leaf. All around on the shelves and the sloping ceiling were displayed specimens of the tasteful branch of art which he carried on in unbroken monotony from day to day, and from year to year.

He was a man so quiet, perhaps from his ten years of lonely work, that never was any sound heard of him in his attic ; which indeed was isolated from the rest of the house by the empty rooms below, though there was a door out of them which communicated with the second floor of the dwelling. There was another entrance to the workroom by a door into a passage running along the side of the house, of which he kept the key, in order to let himself in at any hour ; for he was an early riser, and often came to his work at five o'clock in the morning, and remained until late at night ; taking neither pleasure nor rest, beyond that absolutely necessary for health. He was a small, tough, withered-looking man, stooping a good deal in the shoulders, and with thin, scanty hair. Always upon reaching the deserted printing offices, it was his custom to exchange his boots for a pair of soundless list slippers,

which could make no noise upon the bare boards of his attic. He was a nervous man, starting at every sound, of which however but few ever reached him in his solitude, for the window opened upon the court instead of the street ; and whatever rare tumult might be in the latter only came to his ears softened by the distance. So quiet was the gable that the house-sparrows gathered there in numbers, and their shrill, pert chirping seemed the only sound that did not discompose him.

The sole pleasure of this secluded and laborious being was to see Hester push open the door of his attic, and, with her book under her arm, creep quietly in and climb upon a tall chair which stood at a corner of the press. There she watched him spreading the delicate gold-leaf upon the crimson or blue morocco of his bindings, and stamp them carefully with his elegant devices. Very seldom any conversation passed between these two ; but sometimes the child mounted upon a ladder, and sat on the highest step, which reached nearly to the ceiling, and there read aloud, in a low, pleasant murmur of a voice, which was as soothing as silence itself, from the book which happened to be the favorite of the day. That was the crowning point of his pleasure ; but he never sought it, and never put his sense of delight into words. If Hester ever brought him any book to be mended, however old and stained and worn, he lavished all his art upon it ; pondering in his mind what new device he could discover to embellish it. The nursery rhymes and primers of Hester Morley were marvels in the decorative art of bookbinding ; though they lay unseen in her bedroom, upon some shelves which he had made for her.

The second marriage of John Morley was solemnized in a distant town, and afterwards he took his young bride a short excursion, while his house was being set in order

for her reception. During this time Hester almost lived in the attic, to the inexpressible delight of Lawson ; a delight, however, which was mingled with a profound and smouldering resentment against his master. He could not understand how he could need any companionship beside his child's.

"Lawson," said Hester, one day recurring to a subject which had secretly troubled her ever since the visit of Mr. Waldron and the minister to John Morley, "do you think that God will be really angry with my father for being married to another wife?"

"Ay, do I," answered Lawson, in deep accents and brief words.

"But, Lawson," she said, her face growing pale and awe-stricken, "it is a dreadful thing to make God angry. Miss Waldron has taught me all about it at the Sunday-school. Don't you know what He did to Sodom and Gomorrah? Suppose He sent down fire from heaven, and burnt all the house up? Or suppose He should strike my father and my new mother dead, like Ananias and Sapphira? I can't help thinking about it all day long, and at nights when I awake. What should God be angry for?"

Lawson stooped over his work, breathing softly on the gold-leaf, and smoothing it out carefully with his smoothest finger.

"If God is angry with my father," continued Hester, sobbing, "I think I should like Him to be angry with me as well. If Ananias and Sapphira had any little children, who would take care of them after they were struck dead? But I don't think He will be angry. Have you ever seen my new mother, Lawson?"

"You must not call her mother," said Lawson ; "your mother is in heaven, with God."

"But I've promised to be like her very own daughter

for ever and ever," answered Hester ; " I dor't know what made me promise, only my father said I ought, and it would make him happy. Lawson, I would do anything to make my father happy. And I don't think she will be the same as the stepmothers in books. What was my own mother like, Lawson ? "

With slow and quiet movements, for he seemed incapable of any quick or energetic action, Lawson mounted the step ladder, and reached an old portfolio from the highest shelf. From this he drew out an engraving, mounted upon board, and surrounded by an exquisite scroll of gilding and coloring : it was a woman's face only—a sweet, calm, colorless face, long and oval, with a placid serenity approaching to sadness upon it. The child and the workman bent over it some time in silence.

" That was how she looked," he whispered, " the last time I saw her, just before she died ; and I promised, and your father promised, on our bended knees, that we'd neither have thought, nor care, nor plan, save for you and your happiness, Miss Hester. And this is the way," he cried, smiting his hands together with a sudden agony of passion which seemed impossible in so quiet and subdued a creature, " that my master keeps his promise ! Yes. God and I do well to be angry."

It might have provoked a smile to hear this puny, shivelled, insignificant workman identify himself and his impotent resentment with God and His anger. But there was no one to smile, except Hester, who looked up into his face with wide open eyes of terror and amazement.

" Miss Hester," he said, more wildly. " this is how it is. It is seven years ago, and I've been toiling ever since to make a *dot* for you. Why I've only taken eighteen shillings a week wages from your father, while he gets six or seven, or sometimes ten pounds a week by my work ! I

found out a new way of bevelling the edges, which nobody knows how to do save myself. There was a very nice little fortune for you already. Everybody was saying John Morley is rich. And so this bold, laughing, flirting, flaunting madam has married him for his money, and she will make it fly like chaff before the wind. We shall all be poor again. I've been keeping down my poor mother and myself, when I might have made money for us both."

"Is your mother very poor?" asked Hester.

"Yes. She is living with my sister in Burgundy," he answered; "both of them are widows, and they are quite poor, but for what I send them, and I haven't sent them as much as I could."

"Is my father very rich, Lawson?" asked Hester again.

"He would have been by the time you wanted your *dot*," answered Lawson.

"I don't know what a *dot* is," said Hester.

"It is the money you will want to marry a good husband with," he replied; "and now you will be poor, very poor. It's all over, and I've been a fool, and John Morley is a fool."

He threw himself half across his binding press, and covered his face with his hands, while Hester stood by looking doubtfully at his downcast attitude, and going over in her mind the strange things he had been saying.

"Do you think my own mother knows?" she asked at last in a hushed voice.

"Ay! does she," answered Lawson; "many and many a time she comes up here, and walks about with her soft, quiet feet, which I couldn't hear at all if there was any noise in the room; and she looks over my work, and pushes the right tool towards me, when I don't quite know what to do for the best. Oh, she knows all that goes on in the old house she has left. Don't you think she is

often and often with you, Miss Hester, watching over you in your little bed, and sitting by you in the parlor of an evening, when you're reading? Do you never feel her near you?"

"I think I do," whispered the child, pressing close to the visionary man, and laying her small fingers upon his warm living hand.

"She may die yet! She may die yet!" he muttered to himself; "people die easily sometimes. Then we should be all right again. There's no room for two mistresses in one house. I shall never feel her near to me when the other is here. My best work is over. I shall do no more good in the world as long as the other one is alive."

He continued muttering to himself at intervals, while he burnished the gilding under his hands. Hester mounted to her high seat upon the step-ladder, and sat watching the evening clouds, which could be seen slowly sailing towards the west across the field of sky which was visible from the window. Now and then she sighed as a child seldom sighs. The sun went down, and the distant corners of the attic grew dusky, and filled with shadows; and when the child awoke from her long reverie, cold and troubled, she fancied readily that in the darkest of the gloom there stood the soft, light outline of a figure clothed in white, whose dim face was calm and sweet and sad. It was her mother; but she had entered into a covenant to be as a daughter to her father's second wife.

CHAPTER V.

FLEETING SUNSHINE.

THE motives which had determined the second Mrs. Morley to become the wife of a man fifteen years her senior, and altogether different to the beau ideal of a husband which her girlish fancy had painted, were as complex as the motives to such marriages generally are. In the first place she had attained the age of three-and-twenty, yet, though very pretty and engaging, had met with no real opportunity of escaping from the life she hated ; that of a governess in a middle-class boarding-school. There was a dreadful possibility that her attractions might fade away before she met with an establishment worthy of her ; and she longed to be the mistress of a house of her own. On the other hand, John Morley had the reputation of being rich for his station, and he was a handsomer and more polished man than any of the younger men with whom she was brought into contact. Except one memory, which was sentimentally brooded over in her heart, no one had so nearly touched her frivolous affections as this grave, melancholy, handsome man of middle age, who had abandoned himself to a passionate devotion to her. She felt something of jealousy and triumph in thinking of the young wife, whom he had sorrowed for so austere, and who was at last forgotten in her grave for her sake. As the last reason, she fancied that the toil and monotony of school life had already stolen away something of the softness and

bloom of her fair face. On these grounds she had determined upon becoming John Morley's second wife.

Very naturally she resolved to put his attachment to the test, and not to spare it. She found the new house of which she was the mistress, gloomy, and poverty-stricken in aspect, and she set her heart upon beautifying it. It was a large, rambling old place, much too large for the small family dwelling in it ; and she forecast her plans for turning it all into a habitation suitable to herself. But here she met a sudden and unexpected check, even in the first weeks of her married life. John Morley assured her, with a hundred protestations of his love, that he could not give her permission to do as she pleased with the dreary, half-furnished rooms. One room should be her own, he said, the largest in the house ; and she might buy whatever she chose for it. It was a compromise which was disagreeable to her ; but she resolved to make the most of it. Upstairs there was a large apartment, extending from the front of the house to the back, and wainscoted with panels of oak throughout, which had been hitherto used as a warehouse. This she fixed upon, insisting upon the fulfilment of her husband's promise ; and upon it she lavished all her taste and caprice, while John Morley looked on and laughed, as one laughs at a child playing at keeping house. It was a pleasant time for Rose. She enjoyed the unconditional permission given to her with the full enjoyment of one who has always been obliged to look closely to her expenditure ; with a gay good nature she gave up her plans of embellishing the rest of the house, while she concentrated herself upon this room allotted to her. John Morley's home grew full of sound, in the place of its unbroken stillness. The blithe laugh of his young wife rippled from room to room, blended with the quieter but happy tones of his little girl. Now and then there

came to his ears notes of music from Rose's piano overhead, short, merry tunes, tinkling through the empty rooms, with a suggestion of dancing steps accompanying them ; though there was no one to dance except Hester, whose small feet had never before been set to music. The time was as blissful for John Morley as for his second wife, or rather, immeasurably more so.

The pity was that the girl was no more than a school-girl, with nothing but a school-girl's idea of happiness. She was good-natured, and good-tempered, and quite willing to do what she could to please her husband. But it had never entered her mind that his companionship alone would be sufficient for her. She had no wish whatever to reign over her new household unseen and unenvied by her neighbors. As soon as her drawing-room was furnished and decorated after her own taste, she longed to receive guests in it, who would admire and praise it to her satisfaction. There John Morley, reserved and self-contained, made a stand. He wanted no witnesses to his happiness. The people of Little Aston were not of his kind ; there were none among them who could become his associates, or whom he would choose to be the friends of his wife. On the one hand were the worldlings, the people who wasted their time at the card-table or in the dance ; on the other were the members of the church, ignorant and ill-bred, with whom he had nothing in common beyond the religious conventionalities of church membership. He was separated from the world and the church alike. His wife might welcome to his hearth the old minister and his equally aged wife, whose gentleness could never offend or displease him ; but there was no other person whom he could receive into his house with the cordiality of friendship. Mere acquaintances John Morley could not understand. To eat bread at his table was

a pledge of living friendliness between host and guest. On this point no charm, or persuasion, or rebellion, could avail his wife anything. He was like a rock ; and the poor, silly girl, with her empty mind and light heart, beat against it in vain.

After the first novelty had worn away, John Morley, though retaining his passionate and proud love of his young wife, fell back into his old studious habits ; lost himself, and her, and all his new life, in the books which came almost daily to his hand. If she invaded his quiet room where he sat all day long, and which was too heavy and sombre for a butterfly creature like her, to ask him for some new indulgence, or to display some new possession, he put down his book only for a few minutes, and soon grew absent if she prolonged her visit. He had no thought of any unkindness in this neglect. Hester's mother had been willing to sit hour after hour, his silent companion, ready to hear him if he should like to read aloud some sentence which pleased him more than others, a sentence which to her stood alone, with none before or following it ; and he had taken it for granted that Rose would do the same. Since she did not do it, but avoided his dull room, he did not complain ; but it never occurred to him to alter his own habits. Besides, after the lapse of a few months his eyes were opened to the snare into which he had fallen. He had been guilty of a blunder, he would not call it a sin, which he had formerly blamed harshly in others. He, a chief member of the church, a deacon, had entered into marriage with a worldly woman.

John Morley's creed was colored by his gloomy temperament. He began to look upon Rose, whom he had made his nearest and dearest companion, as a soul which still walked in darkness, under the tyranny of Satan ; and whose destiny was an eternal separation from all goodness

and happiness. The gayety and charms of his young wife began to make his heart ache. He saw her treading mirthfully along the path leading to ruin and perdition. The possibility of eternal punishment, which he had calmly and philosophically considered from a distance, was brought into his own home, he had himself taken it to his heart ; it was the only dowry his wife had brought him. In the quiet of his room this thought presented itself to him with innumerable and stinging variations—that the voice which he heard singing and babbling about his house would one day wail in hopeless anguish, and that the heart which he had won for himself would be pierced through with unutterable and unavailing repentance.

It is no marvel that John Morley set himself with his whole heart and mind to the task of enlightening and converting this beloved, but lost, soul. He argued with his wife ; he read to her ; he prayed for her. He called in the minister, as he would have called in a physician had she been stricken with some malady. Rose was frightened at first, and yielded readily to tears. But after a while she grew indignant, and then weary. Never before had it been suggested to her that anything was amiss in her. She had been christened and confirmed, and had been a communicant of her church. She ran over the **Commandments**, and found that she had kept them from her youth up. Certainly if she stood in any kind of danger the whole world was full of souls who were in equal, if not greater, peril. All this commotion was the result of having married an austere and narrow-minded man, who first shut her out from all the pleasures and enjoyments of her age, and then surrounded her with imaginary terrors. She began to harden herself against him ; and resolved to bring up Hester after a fashion opposed to the strict rule of her father.

If there was any influence which could have won over the worldly spirit of Rose Morley to the grave but peaceful religion into whose sweet safety John Morley vainly strove to drive her, it would have been the simple faith of the child, who knew nothing of the technical phrases of any creed. Like the child Christ, Hester both asked and answered questions in such a manner as to startle and trouble the giddy mind of her young stepmother. But how could this gay and thoughtless girl help growing weary of her monotonous life, with a husband always burdened with spiritual anxieties for her, and a child who cared less for the plays of childhood than for the thoughts and pursuits of older years? She found herself altogether out of her element—a mere butterfly, which had flown heedlessly into a damp and chilly cave, where it could only fold its wings, and lose the brilliant hours of the summer which was swiftly passing away. The merry laugh and the tinkling of music ceased in the house ; her step grew languid, and her voice low ; the blue eyes were dimmed, and the cheeks faded ; but John Morley saw in the change only what he wished to see—the pain and travail of a soul which was struggling into life.

CHAPTER VI.

GREAT FOLKS.

MR. WALDRON'S parliamentary duties deprived the church at Little Aston of his presence, and that of his daughter, during a considerable portion of each year. The church and the minister were perhaps a little more at their ease during their absence ; but they felt all the increased importance of their personal attendance at the chapel, and their return was anxiously looked forward to. It had become a point of etiquette for Mr. Watson to proceed at once to Aston Court as soon as the rumor of their arrival reached his ears, in order to congratulate himself and them upon their reunion with the little church of which they were the most conspicuous pillars.

They had come down from London upon the commencement of the long autumnal recess, and Mr. Watson set out the next morning upon his visit of homage. Aston Court was about a mile from Little Aston, but most of the road lay through the fine old park which surrounded the newly-built mansion. Mr. Waldron was a utilitarian, and had sold off the deer which had belonged to the former owner, and divided his park into regular divisions, for the grazing of cattle and the growth of hay. The new house was plain, square, and massive, flanked by two smaller, but equally formal, wings. The windows of plate glass were of uniform size, distributed along the front of the building at even distances, and one large entrance door,

with a portico, stood in the exact centre of the ground floor. The garden stretching before it was laid out in long, straight borders of the same breadth and length; and the trees separating it from the park were kept well clipped. The usual reception-room, which was the dining-room of the mansion, was a large handsome apartment, but heavy and dull. Its principal decoration consisted of two life-size portraits of Luther and Melancthon, excellently painted; the former hard, acute, and intrepid; the latter soft and feminine, with mournful blue eyes which seemed weary of gazing upon life. There was also above the fireplace a richly illuminated and gilded testimonial, signed by a thousand Nonconformists,—inscribed to David Waldron in gratitude for his eminent services in the House of Commons in defence and advancement of the cause of Nonconformity. The middle of this apartment was filled by a long wide table, similar to those seen in committee rooms, and covered with dark leather; a number of leather-covered chairs were ranged along the walls. Curtains of deep crimson damasks, always drawn a little over the window, shed a solemn light into the room—a twilight which was not mournful gloom, but rather a wealthy and grand obscurity.

It was into this reception-room that the minister was ushered. It was Saturday morning, and on the next day Mr. Waldron and his daughter would occupy the large curtained pew in the corner of the chapel, which was appropriated to their use. Miss Waldron was seated at the table, a small insignificant person to look at, but the daughter of David Waldron, M. P. She received her pastor with mingled fervor and condescension, and invited him to a seat beside her. Mr. Waldron soon joined them, and a close conversation, a sort of religious gossip, about the affairs of the church and its members, ensued.

"Brother Morley is married again, as you know," said Mr. Watson, after some other subjects had been discussed, "and he is beginning to feel sorely troubled about his young wife. She remains the same worldly, thoughtless creature she was before her marriage."

"Ay! ay!" answered Mr. Waldron, shaking his head, "we gave in too soon there. You and I, as well as John Morley, were smitten with the young woman's beauty."

"Father!" interrupted Miss Waldron, in a tone of reproof.

"It is true," continued Mr. Waldron; "I never felt so checkmated in my life as when she appeared suddenly in the very midst of our expostulation with John Morley. But we must get her into the church. There must be ways and means of winning her over. We will put her into Miss Waldron's hands."

Miss Waldron was one of those persons who are never called by their Christian names even by their nearest relatives. It is possible that, in conversation with her, her father or her brother might sometimes address her by it; but it was not known beyond her own family circle. There seems something significant in this suppression of the name by which one is enrolled under the banner of the cross.

"By what means shall I get at this young woman?" asked Miss Waldron, not at all unwilling to undertake the conversion of Rose Morley, and entering into it as a business.

"I scarcely know," answered Mr. Watson, in perplexity.

"There is my Sunday-school class," continued Miss Waldron, "and my Mothers' Meeting on Monday, my Wednesday evening Bible Class, and my Saturday night Female Prayer-meeting."

"I am afraid we could not get her to attend any of these," replied the minister.

"Why not?" inquired Miss Waldron.

"She is quite an educated person," he said, timidly, "and has all the manners of a lady. She has been a governess, and plays very well, and can draw. She holds herself rather above the rest of our people. They are a little unpolished, you know."

"I do not see then what can be done in such a case," said Miss Waldron, with a stiff and chilly air.

"I recollect," said Mr. Waldron, "she has a good deal the manner of a lady: and very pretty she is, too. John Morley has a sweet-looking little girl by his first wife; I like to see that child in chapel. Miss Waldron, I think your only way of getting at her will be to call upon her. You might invite her to return your call. It would do you no harm, and, under God's blessing, might do her a great deal of good."

Miss Waldron mused with an impenetrable face.

"Do, my dear young lady," urged the minister eagerly, seeing a possible avenue by which gospel influences might reach Rose Morley's benighted soul; "your rank and position would give you consequence in her eyes; she is a girl to be touched by them."

"Mr. Watson," she said, with some severity, "we belong to different spheres altogether."

"I know you do," he hastened to say.

"And," she continued, lifting her hand to enjoin silence while she finished speaking, "there would be a danger of fostering her pride; but I will be on my guard against that. I do not desire to shrink from any cross, and I will call upon her. What else can be done for her soul may occur to me; and it is possible I may go so far as to invite her here for conversation with me upon her spiritual wel-

fare. But that is in the future. For the present you may leave the young person in my hands."

Mr. Watson bowed, and thought it would be judicious to say no more upon this subject.

"Your son," he said, in a hesitating and deprecating tone, as if anxious to express his interest in him, yet doubtful how the great man would take it, "is all well with Mr. Robert Waldron?"

The father's face clouded at the mention of this name, but there was no anger against the timorous minister in his reply.

"No, no, my friend," he answered, frankly. "I did wrong in sending my boy to Eton and Oxford. There never was a more hopeful lad, full of good intentions and desires, before he went from home. There were as many signs of grace in him as in Miss Waldron; but the saying is fulfilled, 'One shall be taken and the other left.' Yet in part, if not altogether, it is my sin."

"It will be all well with him yet," said the minister, in a gentle tone of encouragement; "our prayers will not be unanswered, though the answer tarry. Is he with you?"

"We expect him, but only for a few days," said Mr. Waldron; "our household ways are too strict for him, and his habits are such as I cannot tolerate under my roof. Yet he is only gay, not vicious, I trust. But let us talk about something else; my son is no pleasant theme to me."

About an hour later, Mr. Watson, passing by John Morley's shop, looked in for a few minutes to announce to him the arrival of the Waldrons and their expected appearance at chapel the next day—intelligence which made so much impression upon John Morley that he remembered to repeat it to his young wife as she sat moping

and dull at the tea-table. It came as a little gleam of light from the outer world, and the effect produced by it would have been astounding to the abstracted husband could he have been made aware of it. Rose had retained a lively impression of the great man whom she had seen and spoken to before her marriage ; and she had often cast furtive glances at his large, empty pew in the chapel, to which she accompanied her husband twice every Sunday. Mr. Waldron was by far the greatest man she had ever seen.

The next morning Rose made a very careful and elaborate toilette ; and even John Morley, in the midst of his anxious Sabbath thoughts of her as one still upon the brink of eternal peril, could not check the pleasant and flattering admiration which her beauty produced in him. He felt inclined to believe, against all reason and revelation, that she was too fair to be doomed to any misery either in this world or the world to come. With her hand resting on his arm, he walked proudly up the old-fashioned street. The close carriage from Aston Court passed them by ; and both he and Rose caught the eye and the hurried salutation of the great Mr. Waldron from his seat beside his daughter, who looked neither to the right hand nor to the left. The chapel was better filled than ordinary, and the minister preached with more than usual animation. At the end of the service, while all the congregation were standing up, but hanging back till the owners of Aston Court should take their departure, Mr. Waldron presented Mrs. Morley to his daughter, and said, in a voice loud enough to be heard half through the place, "Miss Waldron intends to call upon you at half-past eleven o'clock precisely on Tuesday morning next."

CHAPTER VII.

MISS WALDRON.

AT half-past eleven o'clock precisely on Tuesday morning, Miss Waldron, attired in a gown of some dark-brown stuff, with a brown bonnet and shawl to match, opened the door of John Morley's shop with such a jerk as to set the little bell tinkling furiously. It caused Mrs. Morley to jump up nervously in her costly and tasty drawing-room on the floor above. She had dressed herself and Hester in very becoming and very light morning dresses, of a pale tint, which would not have been unfit for the handsomest room in Aston Court; and, thus prepared, she awaited the announcement of her distinguished visitor. But Miss Waldron positively declined to penetrate farther into a tradesman's abode than the room which opened out of the shop. It was only because a religious conversation might be liable to interruption in the shop itself that she did not insist upon Mrs. Morley receiving her call there, as a protest against the wild supposition that there was anything like equality between them. But Miss Waldron had taken up her cross this morning, and was willing to bear it even into John Morley's back parlor.

Rose entered the dark, dull room to which she had been summoned with a pretty bashfulness, half matronly and half girlish; and Miss Waldron met her with an awkward embarrassment, for fear of this young person feeling too free with her. When the first stiff courtesies had been exchanged, Miss Waldron took her seat uncomfortably

upon the edge of a chair, and looked steadily, almost sternly, into the smiling face of Rose Morley.

"I have called upon you," she said, in an exhortatory voice, "at the united request of my father, who is a deacon, and Mr Watson, who is the pastor of the church at Little Aston. They desired me to see if anything could be done for you. You do not attend any of my meetings, so I have come to see you here."

"I did not know that you had any meetings," answered Rose, apologetically; "but I do not think I should feel at home in any of them. I was not brought up to going to chapel."

She spoke nervously, and seemed on the verge of shedding tears. Miss Waldron felt satisfied that her very first words had made an impression upon this frivolous object of Mr. Watson's pastoral solicitude.

"Ah!" she said, "you were brought up in the darkness of the Establishment; but now you are brought to the light you ought to love the light. A very eminent minister told me that, by my birth and rank, I am set as a candle upon a candlestick, and not put in a secret place, or under a bushel, that they which come in may see the light."

She paused, and looked down into her satchel with a sigh, as if exhausted with shining too brilliantly; while Rose, puzzled and shy, could not think of anything to say in response, and Hester, from her usual seat in the old arm-chair, listened and looked inquisitively at their visitor.

"Ah! my dear young"—she was about to say "person," but her eyes fell upon Rose's sweet face and elegant dress, and she checked herself, leaving a blank in her address,—“I came here to-day, not out of idle compliment to you or your husband, but to awaken you to the danger of your condition. It has been well said that we who have the bread of life should not only invite our fellow sinners

to partake, but should carry it to them and compel them to eat. You are perishing, you are famishing before my eyes for lack of food, and I must force you to take from my hands what will save you. It is a necessity which is laid upon me."

Rose's trouble and perplexity were increased indefinitely by this speech, and she looked from Miss Waldron to Hester, and back again to Miss Waldron.

"I scarcely understand," she said, blushing deeply ; "you know I have always lived among Church people, and I never heard any one talk in this manner before. I am sure you are very kind, but I don't understand clearly about the bread and the light. I have been confirmed, and I used to take the Sacrament sometimes ; always at Christmas and Easter. I am very stupid I know, but I scarcely understand you."

"Do you feel no unsatisfied cravings of your immortal soul?" asked Miss Waldron.

"I don't know," answered Rose, with increasing shamefacedness ; "there are a good many things I am not satisfied with. We never have any friends to come in and see us, and we never go out anywhere, except to Mr. Watson's. I expected to be a great deal happier, and more free, when I was married ; but I am not so. Mr. Morley has no taste for company, and I am shut up here day after day, till I feel more lonely than I could tell you."

"But do you not feel the load of your sins?" pursued Miss Waldron.

"I am sure I'm not very sinful," she said, pouting a little ; "I'm not idle, or ill-tempered, or cross. Little Hetty knows that. Oh, no! Miss Waldron, I don't break the Sabbath, or steal, or kill, or—or anything else that breaks the Commandments. No ; if I had any sins I would own them. But I am only silly. Yes ; I know I am not

the clever person Mr. Morley thought me before he married me ; and he is disappointed, and I am very dull. I could not bear it but for little Hetty. Little Hetty, my darling, come and kiss me this minute."

In the presence of this strange visitant, who eyed her so coldly and rigidly, the poor, silly, little soul of Rose Morley felt a sudden need of having the warm arms of the child round her neck, and her fond young lips pressed to her mouth. Hester slipped down from her chair, and kissed her stepmother affectionately ; then standing beside her, she turned her face towards Miss Waldron.

"Indeed she does not understand," she said, quaintly and confidentially ; "we two have talked about it often and often, and she does not feel like being a very great sinner. *We* know we are, because we've been taught it over and over again ; but she does not. If we hadn't been taught it so often, we shouldn't have believed it all in a minute. You wouldn't believe you were the chief of sinners if nobody had taught you so, would you ?"

A dull red flush suffused Miss Waldron's cheek and brow as she listened to Hester's explanation of her stepmother's benighted state. She could not meet the clear frank gaze of the child.

"I was once a sinner," she answered, "when I was a little girl like you ; but I became a member of the church before I was much older than you are. Ever since I have had one single object in life—the good of my fellow-creatures."

She remained silent for a minute or two, with closed eyelids ; while Hester, stroking her stepmother's hand gently, looked with a child's steady gaze into Miss Waldron's face. Rose Morley felt more bewildered and embarrassed than ever ; and dismissed from her mind all idea of offering her guest any refreshment.

"I am going now to my tract district," said Miss Waldron, recalling herself to the present moment. "I trust you will think over seriously what I have said to you ; and may the thorns not choke the good seed. Yours is a very interesting case. I have here a small book, written by myself, which gives an account of a young woman who died of a broken heart, but whom I visited on her death-bed, and brought to repentance. I will present it to you, Mrs. Morley. I am about to order a book from your husband, which you can bring down to Aston Court yourself, when it arrives. It will be a nice walk for you and Hester ; and we can converse again upon this subject. I am always at home till eleven o'clock in the morning, for I employ two hours after breakfast in reading and meditation."

She rose to take her leave, offering her hand condescendingly to Mrs. Morley, who was in a flutter of amazement and timidity. If there was any doubt as to Rose's silliness there could be none as to the sweetness of her temper. She could pout a little, and she lost her buoyancy in the dull atmosphere of her new home ; but there was no canker of ill-humor or pride in her nature. She was quite unconscious of any impertinence in her visitor, and was perfectly willing to carry anything down to Aston Court for her. In her simple heart she gave Miss Waldron credit for being as saintly as she claimed to be ; and with a real hope that she might find in her a guide and friend, who would make clear to her the mysteries of her husband's creed, she looked forward eagerly to the opportunity of meeting with her again.

CHAPTER VIII.

A LITTLE GIFT.

WHETHER Hester or Rose Morley felt the most childish pleasure in the prospect of a visit to Aston Court it would be difficult to say. The latter, with her sweet temper and imperturbable self-complacency, could not be sensitive to any impertinence which did not take the form of an open insult ; so that she looked forward with delight to the moment she would find herself received upon any terms in the mansion of Mr. Waldron. Hester had been there two or three times at the annual treat of the Sunday scholars, and her imagination had been struck with the larger dimensions and greater magnificence of the house as compared with her own home, which she so rarely quitted.

The memorable morning came—a soft morning towards the end of September, with a fine and tender film of mist hanging about the autumnal trees, and hiding the distant prospect. Already the dark green of the foliage, which had grown almost sombre with the summer's sultry heat, was beginning to brighten with the tints of autumn. A thick, fine dew spangled the grass. The shadows cast by the trees were less clear and sharp than when the sun had shone through a drier atmosphere. There was a brisker activity among the birds, who no longer screened themselves from the heat amidst the innumerable leaves, but fluttered busily about ; while the rooks from their rookery amidst the trees which surrounded Aston Court were

winging their way in battalions towards the corn-fields, many of which were already cleared of their harvest sheaves. Here and there, from among the short stubble, started up a covey of birds, with a whirr of wings and a swift flight out of danger ; while the hares crept timidly along the tall grass, which had shot up again in the rich soil of the park since the hay harvest in June.

To Rose and Hester, coming from the dusty heart of the town, which was nearly as close and crowded as the centre of some populous city, this park was a very garden of Eden ; and they entered it with buoyant steps. The face of John Morley's young wife had put on its sweetest smile and fairest grace. There was not a line upon it to betray the weariness and growing discontent she felt with her dull life. In fact she did not feel it dull at that moment, and she was the creature of the moment. Her husband, and the new home of which she was mistress, were as completely blotted out of her mind as though they had no existence. The world consisted only of herself and Hester, and this beautiful park, bathed in the soft light of a September sun. She sang aloud and blithely as she trod lightly along the path, with Hester, as happy as herself, tripping at her side.

Suddenly Rose Morley stopped, with an exclamation of surprise, and with a movement as if she were about to take flight—a pretty and graceful movement which, with her heightened color and parted lips, lent to her an additional charm at a moment when an additional charm was not needed. They had just turned a bend in the drive, which was hidden by a cluster of trees, and came unexpectedly upon a young man, strolling idly along with a gun upon his shoulder. Though he wore a velveteen shooting jacket and thick boots, and had no gloves on, he had an air of ease and rank, almost amounting to dignity, which

often characterises those who have never been in a dependent position. He was handsome, and his appearance was well cared for. His face resembled a little that of Mr Waldron ; but he was only twenty-two years old, and his expression was more self-satisfied and careless than that of the busy great man. It said, as plainly as expression could say, that he did not like trouble in any guise. His motto would be, "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die!"

"Rose!" exclaimed this young man, in an accent of wonder, as he came face to face with Mrs. Morley ; and the next instant he stretched out his hands, and caught hers in them, as if to prevent her taking the flight which her movement seemed to threaten.

"Robert! oh, Robert!" she answered with a bright smile and blush upon the face she lifted up to him, in an attitude of childish and forgetful delight, while he spoke again in quiet and hurried tones.

"Whatever in the wide world brings you here?" he asked, and a fine ear might have detected a slight tone of vexation in his voice. "It is two years since we bade one another farewell forever at Oxford, and I fancied that you were still there. Are you angry with me yet, Rose? But no ; you are too good, too amiable, to be angry long. You were never angry with me, I remember, when my behavior was worst. Rose, I never met such a dear girl as you!"

It seemed to strike him that he had never met with any girl as pretty, for he fastened his eyes upon her face, and his own assumed an air of pleasure and satisfaction.

"Upon my word," he continued, taking one of her gloved hands again in his, "you are prettier than ever, Rose. There is some change in you. What is it? You have lost that little governess primness I used to tease

you about, which never sat well upon your face. And your dress is more tasty than it used to be. Have you come into a fortune? Has that rich uncle you told me of died, and made you his heiress? Tell me what wind has blown you into this part of the country?"

"I am married," said Mrs. Morley, with downcast eyes.

"Married!" repeated the young man, an exclamation which he followed by a low, long whistle, that brought his dogs bounding about him, but he kicked them away with something of peevishness and irritation in his manner. "Married, Rose!" he repeated, gazing into her conscious face. "Ah! well, we were no more than friends, you remember; and we can be that still. And who is the good man?" He tried to speak in an easy tone of indifference, but there was an air of chagrin upon his face, which escaped the downcast eyes of Mrs. Morley. She blushed, and stammered; but at last was compelled to speak reluctantly.

"He is a very good man," she answered; "his name is John Morley."

"John Morley the bookseller!" ejaculated the stranger. "Why, Rose, where are your old ambitions flown to? Do you forget that two years ago nothing short of some thousands a year would satisfy you, and I had not that to offer you? I, a poor spendthrift, with a hard-hearted father, and not even an entailed estate, so that he could cut me off with a shilling if he chose. Oh! what fools we were!" He spoke in mingled mockery and regret, with a smile of bitterness, which it was impossible for Rose to comprehend; for catching the brighter glitter of his eyes, and the curl of his lip, she smiled back again gaily.

"Ah!" she said, with one of her most childish pouts, "but nobody else cared a straw about me; and I might have remained a governess all my life."

"Perhaps so," he answered coldly; "but are you really the Mrs. John Morley I am running away from? Miss Waldron said at breakfast she expected you this morning, and I made haste to take myself off; never thinking—who could think?—that it was my old friend, Rose. We were no more than friends, were we? Do you remember our stolen walks together, when everybody believed you were safe in bed? Ah, Rose! you were not made to be a governess."

"No, I was not," she said; "oh! I remember well. But what brings you here, Robert? Are you visiting at Aston Court?"

"Ah!" he said, with some embarrassment, "you only knew me as Robert Hall; but my full name is Robert Hall Waldron!"

He tried to speak as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world to suppress one's chief name; and Rose, who was not critical, accepted the explanation with no other feeling than one of surprise.

"Then you are Mr. Waldron's son!" she exclaimed. "Why you made me believe he was a shocking, cruel old ogre! Oh! for shame, sir! I have seen him, and spoken to him, and I like him very much; and I am sure, quite sure and certain, that he likes me. He was at our house yesterday, and he would make Mr. Morley call me to speak to him, and he said he should like to see me sometimes at Aston Court, and he hoped Miss Waldron would be my friend. There now! And you always told me he was such a dreadful, bad, hard-hearted old Turk!"

"Ah, Rose!" said Robert Waldron, "you are the same sweet-tempered creature as ever. I could swear to that gay voice of yours amidst a thousand—so clear, and merry, and sweet. I should like you to speak to me forever. Do you sing as you used to do? Will you sing for

us at Aston Court? It will not be so dull there now you are near us. You must let me come and see you in your own home, or I shall never believe you are married. I cannot feel that you are John Morley's wife.'

"But I am," she answered, with a clear little laugh; "and I have a daughter, too, Mr. Robert Hall Waldron. This is my very own little daughter, sir! Hester Morley."

He had not been altogether unconscious of the child's presence before, for it had imparted to him a feeling of more ease and freedom in this unexpected meeting with Rose. But now he looked at her more attentively. The grave and noble face of the child was full of wonder, which had something of a vague sadness in it; and her large earnest eyes were raised to him with an expression of innocent reproach. He felt in an instant that he had wounded her, and it was no part of his nature to hurt any one intentionally. There was no malice in his temperament. He had spoken perhaps slightly of her father—a slight which Rose had not felt, and he wished to efface the painful impression.

"Hester Morley," he repeated, as if long familiar with the name, "the little girl I have seen sometimes at chapel! Ah! I know you again, you see. Your father is quite a friend of mine, as well as your new mamma. Do you love her very much?"

"Yes, very much," answered Hester, earnestly; "and my father loves her dearly as well. We are a great deal happier than we were before."

She spoke with a childish fervor which touched the impressible nature of Robert Waldron, and for a moment made him feel hardly innocent in his interview with John Morley's silly young wife. Perhaps it would be better to let this first encounter be the last. Yet no harm could come of their intercourse except a little dissatisfaction and

discontent on the part of Rose. There had been no positive love-making between them in the old times ; but now that she was married, to a tradesman too, she might possibly compare him with her husband, to the disadvantage of the latter. Still, he did not quite like to lose sight of an old friend ; and his own home was very dull. The decision was too much trouble for him, and he resolved to cast it upon a chance. If this grave and innocent child gave him permission to enter their secluded home, he would take it as a sign that no harm could come of it. He would not for the world disturb the peace of John Morley or his wife ; but he could not quite make up his mind to see no more of Rose. Hester should decide it.

"May I come to see you at your own home, little Hester?" he asked, with his most pleasant smile and voice.

"Would you like to come very much?" she asked, with a wistful look into his eyes.

"Very much," he answered.

"Then we shall like you to come," answered Hester, holding out her hand to him, as if to assure him of a welcome. Robert Waldron clasped the little fingers in his own, with a strange feeling of reverence for the child's faith in him ; and when he released them he took off his hat with an unaccustomed deference, and bidding them good-bye, pursued his way along the park, while Hester and Rose Morley went on to Aston Court.

Miss Waldron received them with a distant approach to cordiality, which was more than enough to satisfy Rose. She enjoyed being in the spacious rooms, with a wide garden and park stretching before the windows. There was nothing narrow, confined, or sordid in this place of wealth ; and her spirit expanded in it. She felt more at home, even here in Miss Waldron's austere presence, than in the

close, dark, built-in rooms of her husband's house. Happily, both she and Hester gave satisfaction, upon the whole, to their patroness. In the amiable yielding of Rose she saw material for moulding a Christian after her own model ; and Hester would soon bud into an infant prodigy of grace. Mr. Waldron came in before they left ; and Miss Waldron graciously seconded his invitation to come again soon to Aston Court. Naturally, the fresh charm of Rose Morley's pretty face had more effect upon the elderly hard-worked man than upon his daughter ; but both were well pleased to have her appear occasionally to relieve the tedium of a country life.

CHAPTER IX.

NEW HOPES.

THE intercourse between Miss Waldron and Mrs. John Morley ripened into a kind of intimacy which continued crude and raw at its nearest approach to mellowness ; a sour grape which would have set on edge any other teeth than those of the dull and weary young wife. It was the first winter of her married life, and she seized eagerly upon every chance and every excuse for going to Aston Court. It was at least an opportunity for displaying the too costly and elegant dresses which were lost in the seclusion of her own home. Miss Waldron sharply reproved her for them, and Rose meekly promised to buy no more when they were done with ; but in order to wear them out, it was needful to wear them, and Miss Waldron was compelled to acknowledge the logic of her argument. Mr. Waldron liked to see the pretty girl about his house, and to hear her pleasant voice, now speaking, now singing, just as he willed ; while Robert, in sheer idleness and without thought, loitered at home, instead of going off on some autumn tour as usual, satisfied with the little ripple of excitement which the near vicinity of Rose kept stirring gently about him.

Nor was John Morley at all discontent with his wife's new friendships. They had restored her old brightness and buoyancy, and they afforded her a pleasant society without entailing upon him the dreaded necessity of receiving and entertaining guests in his own house ; for it is

needless to say, that it entered into the imagination of no one to conceive the idea of Miss Waldron visiting familiarly under the tradesman's roof. Robert Waldron came often; and Mr. Waldron, whenever he had business to transact with his brother deacon, no longer tarried in the shop, but entered the room behind; when by opening the door, and calling in sonorous tones for Mrs. Morley and Hester, he was always sure of securing a few minutes' lively chat, such as had a wonderful flavor for the dry, hard mind of the puritanical man. But Miss Waldron came never. Still, John Morley was not disturbed. He was too democratic to trouble himself with questions of superiority and inferiority in the social scale. He believed, and he had no reason to believe otherwise, that Miss Waldron was a young woman of eminent piety; all the church said so, and every word and look of her own asserted it. She was interesting herself in the conversation of his young wife, so beloved, yet so worldly, whose condition weighed heavily upon his spirit, and caused him hours of painful and accusing thought. He thanked God fervently for this intimacy; and a brighter glow of brotherly feeling toward the Waldrons was kindled in his heart.

About this time, also, there were new hopes cherished by Mr. Waldron for his son. There had been such hopes before, brooded over and fostered in secret; but while they were still callow and unfledged, some fresh outbreak of Robert's had always caused them to perish. He was not vicious; he had never yet been guilty of any flagrant crime; and in the eyes of most fathers he would have seemed a sufficiently promising son. But Mr. Waldron, like John Morley, could not be content with anything short of a decided change from the careless freaks of youth to the complete devotion of himself to religion. He had put both his children under a forcing frame, and his

daughter had bloomed into the blossom he had hoped for ; though in his secret soul he marvelled at the scanty sweetness and beauty of the growth. But it was not so with his son. Instead of becoming the strong, staunch dissenter he wished for, he had developed into a lax indifference, composed partly of indolence and partly of disgust. He had always been anxious to abridge his visits at home, and prolong those listless sojourns abroad which he professed to enjoy. But this autumn he seemed in no hurry to quit Aston Court. He submitted himself to the rigorous rules of his father's house ; was quiet and thoughtful ; attended chapel regularly every Sunday morning, and not unfrequently in the evening. In fact, his conduct was blameless, except that he would not listen to the exhortations and reproofs of his sister. In his secret heart Mr. Waldron foretasted the joy which the angels in heaven would experience over his son's repentance.

The visits of Robert Waldron to John Morley's house were ostensibly paid to Hester. The child attached herself to him with a very frank and very warm affection ; and his easy nature, which found great delight in the admiration and love of others, returned her fondness. Never did a man—he was scarcely more than a boy yet—drift more aimlessly into a strong current of temptation. He very seldom saw John Morley, who kept close to his business ; but Rose's drawing-room became his most frequent resort.

CHAPTER X.

SUNDAY VISITORS.

IT was a Sunday evening in the depth of winter, with a keen, bitter wind whistling round the house, and moaning under the gables, and with a thick carpet of snow scarcely trodden, lying in the narrow street. John Morley was gone to chapel without his wife, who had been slightly ailing all the week ; and Hester had stayed at home to be her companion. Both the servants were gone out also. Though she was really somewhat unwell, never had Rose look so pretty as this night, with a lace cap half covering her fair hair, and a bright-colored shawl hanging gracefully about her, and forming a strong contrast to the unusual delicacy of her face. The drawing-room, where she was sitting with Hester, was well lit up ; and a passer-by, if there were any, could not fail to notice the brightness of the light within, if he did not hear the tones of the piano which Rose was playing, not being ill enough to give up that pleasure. Apparently some one had seen the light, and heard the music, for there was a knock, twice repeated, at the house door.

Hester lighted a candle, and went downstairs alone, for she had promised her father faithfully not to let Rose be exposed to any cold air during his absence. The key was hard to turn in the lock, and she had to put both her hands and all her strength to it ; but at last it yielded, and she opened the door cautiously. A tall figure, well wrap-

ped up, and sprinkled with snow, stood upon the door sill ; but Hester's momentary alarm was quickly pacified by hearing a friendly and familiar voice.

"Is your father at home, dear little Hetty?" inquired Robert Waldron.

"Oh, no!" answered Hester, still holding the door in her hand, and keeping the untimely visitor on the outside ; "he went to chapel nearly half an hour ago, and he will not come home till late, because there is some meeting after the sermon. Do you want to see him very much, Mr. Robert?"

"Not particularly," he said ; "only Miss Waldron, who is not able to come up to chapel to-night, told me to inquire how your mother is. Is she at home, my dear Hetty?"

"Yes," replied Hester ; "did you not hear her playing before you knocked?"

"I suppose she is too poorly for me to come in and see her?" he said.

"Oh, no!" she cried eagerly, "if you'd please to come in. Only you must take off your great coat, for it is covered with snow, and you must not touch her with your cold hands. My father never touches her when his hands are cold."

She had admitted him into the old-fashioned entrance, which had a kitchen grate, and many doors entering into it, with the staircase running up one side of it ; and she had already turned the key again in the lock, while Robert stood twirling his hat upon his hand, with an aspect of hesitating irresolution. Hester, after locking the door, approached to take from him his hat and coat.

"You are sure I shall do no harm by seeing your mamma, Hetty?" he asked, again leaving the decision of his conduct to the unconscious answer of the child.

"Oh, no!" she said gayly; "she is not so very poorly, and she will be very glad to see you, and so shall I. Please to follow me upstairs."

She tripped up lightly before him, holding the candle high above her head, and looking back now and then with a half-childish, half-womanly smile. He was in Rose's drawing-room, speaking to her, while Hester held both his hands to prevent his touching her, before he had well collected his thoughts. He sank into the seat Hester placed for him near the fire, feeling himself in a kind of dream, in which his mind or conscience dare not stir, for fear of dispelling the fleeting vision. He was afraid to think; but from time to time he glanced, almost timidly, at the sweet pallor of Rose's face, and the clear but gentle lustre of her eyes. How much more lovely she was than when he had known her three years ago! They had not much to say to one another; but Rose sighed at times, and then his eyes were raised to her face with an air of perplexity and sadness. He took Hester upon his knee, and read to her that charming child's book, "The Story without an End." Though he read well, he was not conscious of a word beyond the title; but he knew that Rose was listening; and Hester's arm round his neck, and her soft cheek upon his shoulder, made him feel weaker than a reed, with some subtle and clinging influence winding about him he knew not how. The sound of his own voice was the only sound that could be heard; for if there were any footsteps in the streets on a Sunday night at this hour of Divine service, they fell noiselessly upon the snow. Suddenly, upon the utter quiet, there came the sharp and noisy bang of a door falling to in some part of the house; and Robert started nervously from his chair, and looked about him as if for some means of escape, or place of concealment.

"Why it is only a door slamming somewhere," said Hester, with a little laugh of amusement ; "I must go and shut it, or else it will be frightening you again."

"Shall I come with you?" asked Robert.

"No, thank you," answered the child, assuming a fine tone of superiority, "*I* am not frightened. What is there to be afraid of? Besides, I must go and see that the kitchen fire is not gone out, and you must not go there with me."

She lighted a candle, and went out into the dark passage, screening the scarcely lit flame with her hand. Downstairs ran her small, nimble feet ; and then Hester almost uttered a shrill scream of terror. In the middle of the lobby stood a bent and spare figure, more sprinkled with snow than Robert had been, and with a faint halo of light shining about it from a little lamp, which was on the point of dying out. In another moment she had recognized Lawson, whose sunken eyes were glancing restlessly around him, as he drew off his heavy boots, and set them cautiously on one side.

"Is that you, Lawson?" asked Hester, her heart still beating fast with fear.

"Yes, it's me," he answered ; "I'm uneasy to-night, and I came down to see that all was safe. Let us look in here first."

Upon the other side of the lobby was a door into Mr. Morley's own room ; and he stole noiselessly across the quarried floor, and opened it without a sound. There was the light only of a low fire, of embers glowing without flame, and everything looked dim and indistinct by it. He looked around the room eagerly and keenly, and then turned to Hester, who had followed him closely.

"Miss Hester," he whispered, in thick and hurried tones, "I thought I should find your mother here."

"She is upstairs in the drawing-room," she answered; "only Mr Robert is there, too."

"No, not her! not her!" he said impatiently; "I mean your own mother. Don't you know, deary, I've never set eyes on her since John Morley brought a strange woman into the house—never? Though my work all goes wrong, and my hand has lost its cunning, she never comes back to show me what to do. But to-night, while I was at chapel, it came all at once into my mind that I should find her sitting here alone in the house, crying and sobbing, with her face hidden in her hands. I fancied she'd be there in her own old place; but maybe she is upstairs in my work-room."

"But didn't you know *she* was ill?" asked Hester, not venturing to call Rose "mother" in Lawson's hearing.

"No. Ill is she?" he said eagerly; "perhaps she'll die. Your mother died easily, Miss Hester. But I'm going upstairs. Will you come with me, little one?"

He called her "little one" in a tone of such strange and pathetic tenderness that Hester put her hand in his, though she was trembling with an undefined fear. They went out together into the snowy court first, to look up to the lattice window in the high gable. The snow hung about it with a ghostly gleam, and the moon shining wanly upon its diamond panes made them glimmer as if with some feeble, unearthly light within. Lawson lifted Hester in his arms and mounted the outer staircase, which led to the old printing-office. Passing through this they came to the foot of the attic steps, winding up into the pale darkness above. Still carrying her in his arms, Lawson ascended them swiftly but soundlessly, as if fearful of scaring away some timid and easily startled presence. The room was full of light from the moon, which shone directly upon the casement—a visionary light, in which the most

familiar objects assume an unreal aspect. There stood his press, and his tools growing red with rust ; and there the shelves of books, whose gilded bindings shone palely in the gloom. But the room was empty. There was no shadowy figure, sitting alone, with its tearful face hidden in the hands. Hester looked around with mingled dread and love of this unknown mother, so often felt to be present by the man whose heart she could feel beating strongly with anticipation. But neither of them could detect the form they sought in the dimness ; and Lawson put down Hester and walked to and fro in the attic, with gestures of lamentation and despair.

“ If she would only come again ! ” he cried, wringing his hands ; “ if she would but bring me back the cunning of my right hand ! But I have lost it, and nobody can restore it to me, save her. Oh ! come back ! For the sake of your little child, come back ! ”

A fantastic paroxysm took possession of the usually silent and reticent man. He fell upon his knees, and prayed with groans and cries and strong wrestlings of the body, as if he could prevail by those. He called aloud upon the shadow to return and to take form again before his eyes. He bemoaned the loss of his art, as if it had gone from him forever, while Hester stood at his side, terrified yet brave, willing to welcome this vision, if his prayers should be heard and granted. But no answer came. The pale light fell steadily into the room, but it revealed no apparition. Lawson's voice grew faint, and his sobs feeble ; but no spectral messenger came to assuage his passion ; and at last, worn out and exhausted he clasped Hester's hand again in his own nerveless fingers, and descended the stairs in silence.

Upon the second floor there was a door of communication between the work-room and the rest of the house,

and through this Lawson and Hester passed. A thin line of light from beneath the drawing-room door shone across the farthest end of the passage, and caught Lawson's eye.

"Miss Hester," he whispered, "just let me look into the other room, where the light is—the grand new room, you know."

"She is there," answered Hester, with a shrewd look upon her white face.

"Ah! but your mother may be there as well, who knows?" persisted Lawson: "you open the door quietly, and I'll peep in over your shoulder. I saw her as plain as could be only an hour ago."

Hester led him up to the door of the room, where Rose Morley was sitting, and turned the handle with the utmost caution. They gazed in together, unheard and unseen. To Hester's surprise, Robert Waldron was no longer there; but Rose sat in her chair before the fire, with her face hidden in her hands, and sobbing in deep drawn sobs. Lawson caught his breath, and grasped Hester's hand in an unconscious gripe of iron; but she did not utter any cry. They stole downstairs again into the lobby, and then Hester saw upon his face an expression of complete bewilderment and perplexity. Once more he peered into John Morley's dimly-lighted room; and then, shaking his head doubtfully, he opened the outer door, through which the snow came drifting in in large flakes, and still with a troubled look upon his face he bade the child good-night, and went out into the quiet street.

CHAPTER X.

DEEPENING SHADOWS.

A GAIN the sunshine had forsaken the home of John Morley, or only visited it in uncertain gleams of fitful brightness. There were seasons when his young wife sought his dull room as if it were a safe refuge, or a holy sanctuary ; and sat there silent and inactive in the great antique chair, where Hester's mother had been wont to sit and watch him with fond eyes, while he worked among his beloved books. Once or twice, in his absence of mind, he had spoken to her without looking up, and called her by the other name, still cherished and familiar in his thoughts ; and then Rose had started up quickly, and fled from the room, while he had been all unconscious of the blunder of his tongue. It was a very troubled though profound love which John Morley felt for this girl, so much younger both in life and heart than himself ; but it struck deeper roots into his nature every day, in part because it was so troubled. Hester's mother had been his equal, and they had confronted the difficulties of life side by side ; mutual helpers, with the self-same thoughts and the self-same hope in the future. This love, which had possessed the equality of friendship, had been a strength to him—a serene satisfaction, which had been all-sufficing while it was his, but the loss of which had robbed him of even his natural energy and content. But for Rose he took the position of a protector and guardian ; he stood before her to shield her

from the unknown ills of the future. There was a charm and sweetness in this which had been lacking in the more equal marriage with Hester's mother. Even his anxiety about her spiritual welfare,—a little exaggerated by the speculative questions into which his mind naturally ran,—invested her with deeper and more fascinating interest; and Rose herself would have been startled, and would have shrunk from him in dread, if she could have looked into her husband's heart, and seen how she engrossed his thoughts, his hopes, and his prayers.

She was standing behind his chair one morning, looking down, he could not see how sadly, upon his bowed head, where white lines were mingling with the dark hair. She laid her hand upon it at last, softly and reverently; and as he turned smilingly to her, he caught the expression, half sorrowful and half frightened, imprinted upon her fair face.

"Why, what ails you, my dear?" he asked, putting his arm about her, while Rose sank down upon her knees beside him; "what is the matter with you, my Rose?"

"Nothing, nothing," she sobbed; "only I am such a silly young thing, and you are so wise and good! There is such a dreadful gulf between us two; and it will always be there, forever, and ever, and ever! I shall always be silly and wicked, and you will always be wise and good. Oh, why did you ever marry such a creature as me?"

"Why?" said John Morley earnestly; "because I loved you with my whole heart; and I love you still more, Rose, if that be possible, now you have been my wife for more than a year. But it was selfish of me—a man's selfishness; and I do not know how to make you happy now you belong to me."

"No, no, no!" cried Rose, "it was not selfish. It was good, too good of you! You said—or you might have

said—to yourself. ‘Here is a poor, giddy, thoughtless but terfly, just dancing and idling her precious life away ; and I, a wise and good man, will take it into my own house, and give all my wisdom and goodness to the task of making it like myself now and in the world to come.’ But you cannot ; no, you cannot. I ought never to have been the wife of a good man ! I ought never, never to have become the mother of little Hetty !”

“Yes, you ought,” answered John Morley, stroking the soft hair and the burning cheek which would have dried up any tears, had any fallen upon it ; “my house is not the same since you entered it, Rose. You have made us nappy, Hester and me ; more happy than we can tell you. Is there anything that troubles you specially, my love ? Tell me, and if it be within my power the trouble shall be removed. And if it be not, we will pray God together either to take it away, or sanctify it for your good.”

“No, there is nothing,” answered Rose, kissing his hand again and again, “unless you could take me away from myself, unless you could make me somebody else but the silly, giddy, wicked, good-for-nothing creature I am ! If you could only make me like Hester’s mother ! If you could only make me like Hester !”

Her voice died away in sobs, and her tears came in torrents now, while John Morley, distressed and bewildered, could only soothe her, as he would have soothed a child, till the first hysterical paroxysm had passed over, and he could place her in the old easy-chair, and hasten to bring some water for her to drink. She was very quiet and subdued during the rest of the day, and remained in the gloomy room with her husband, smiling faintly whenever she caught his anxious eye ; but at other times regarding his grave face, and his hair streaked with grey, with an expression of mingled pity and dread.

It was only in the evening, when Hester's bedtime came, that she quitted her husband's presence to go upstairs to Hester's room ; not to help her to undress, for the child had been long accustomed to do everything for herself, but to sit watching her, and waiting to kiss her when she was in bed. When Hester knelt down to pray, Rose bowed her head, and clasped her hands, as if joining in the child's inaudible petitions : a sign of grace which would have caused the heart of her husband to throb for joy. She laid her head down upon Hester's pillow with her lips close to her ear, after having put out the light, and spoke to her in the darkness.

"Little Hetty," she said, "would you rather live with good people, or with people you love dearly, dearly?"

Hester answered deliberately, after pausing to consider the question :

"I don't think I should love any but good people," she said.

"But you love me," pursued Rose, "and I'm not good. Would you rather have me as I am, or a very good mamma, as good as Miss Waldron?"

"Oh, but you are good," persisted Hester ; "and I'd rather live with you ten times better than Miss Waldron, however good she is. But if you're not quite, quite good yet, you've only to ask God."

"I have asked Him," sobbed Rose, "and I'm more wicked than ever. Oh, Hetty ! if you had promised to live with somebody you didn't love, and there came afterwards some one you did love with all your heart, and wanted you to live with them, what would you do, little Hetty?"

Rose's cheek was crimson in the darkness, and her eye was burning, while Hester was silent again for a few minutes, coming to a careful judgment upon the case put before her.

"I should be very, very sorry," she answered at last ;
"but if I'd promised, I would keep my promise."

John Morley's second wife said no more to her little step-daughter ; but she gave her a kiss as tender as her own mother could have given. Only had there been a light in the room, Hester would have seen a face wan as death, and blue eyes filled with terror, bending over her ; and she would not have fallen asleep so peacefully as she did, with pleasant dreams of her new mother !

CHAPTER XII.

A GREAT GULF.

A FEW days after this singular conduct on the part of Rose Morley, she received a letter, informing her that a distant relative, residing a long way from Little Aston, was upon the point of death, and wished to see her once more. John Morley opposed no obstacle to the fulfilment of this desire, and gave his wife every assistance in his power. Her arrangements for her absence were very peculiar. She gathered together every small possession of her own, every little trace of her dwelling there, scattered up and down the habitation, and locked them up in the drawing-room, which, as we know, had been renovated and furnished expressly for her own use. In this way there was no vestige left of her late presence in the home, except an ominous and most mournful void. When John Morley entered his chamber for the first time after her departure, he started, with a vague and sudden fright, at its emptiness; and his eyes sought in vain for some token of his young wife. There was the same sense of dreary chilliness as when all the mementoes of Hester's mother had been cleared away from the place which was to know her no more. Throughout the whole house it was the same; there was no hint left that Rose had ever been one of its inmates; except that an ever-growing gloom of absence and abandonment seemed to hang over every apartment. In his undefined uneasiness he thought of comforting himself with a glance at the gay, bright room, which was all hers;

but the door did not yield to his touch. It was locked and the key taken away. The servant, who had some secret suspicions of her own, stole to the door, after her master had left it, and put her eye to the key hole. There was no ray of light in the room, though it was full day ; it followed therefore, as a natural inference, that Mrs. John Morley had closed the shutters, and drawn the thick curtain, before she carried away the key, to insure no intrusion into her room during her absence.

She had set out early in the morning ; and the day, long and dull, dragged heavily past, both for John Morley and Hester. From time to time her husband traced her journey, saying : “ Now she is at such a place ; ” “ At this hour she is waiting at such a station.” As evening drew on he sat down to write his first letter to her ; a tender yet stately letter, with none of the unmeaning expressions which a man of another stamp might have used. It was an epistle fit for publication, choice and elegant in its phrases ; but it was no other than the transcript of his own orderly and elevated mind. Being also a religious man, writing to his wife, who would read the letter at the death-bed of a fellow-mortal, he added some thoughts, solemn, earnest, and devout, which surely could not fail to touch the heart of hearts, even of a giddy and careless girl. And his Rose was not that, he said to himself, with a quick and rare moisture of the eyes, as he recalled her kneeling at his side only a few days ago, with her humble confession of unworthiness ; and from the very depths of his soul there went up a fresh cry to God, one of thousands, that He would turn the heart of his wife towards himself.

He directed the cover of his letter with a sort of pride in the characters which ran from his pen, “ Mrs. John Morley.” She bore his name, and belonged to him. The old glow came back as when in former days he had written

the same name, though to another person. His wife! Wherever she went, or whoever admired her, she was still Mrs. John Morley. Good man as he was, he felt as much pride in her attractions as a more worldly husband would have done. It was not at all less sweet to him to think of her gaining homage and favor by her beauty and winsome ways. While he was writing to her the house did not seem quite so empty; there was as it were an affirmation that she had been there, and would be there again in a few days. There was a fine pleasure in having to indite one of his letters to her; and above all in addressing it to Mrs. John Morley. The man had a whole world of unconscious egotism in him.

He was called away abruptly from this agreeable duty by the intrusion of some country-folk, who had come to ask his counsel concerning some question which perplexed them. It was no unusual occurrence with him. Next to the rector, who also was a bookish man, and often condescended to enter his shop, though there was a church bookseller living in the Square, John Morley was reckoned the wisest man to be met with for ten miles round the town, whether in questions of law, physic, or religion. He was, moreover, more courteous than a doctor, less crafty than a lawyer, and more liberal than a priest. Whatever might be the vexed topic of the day it was necessary to discuss it with the well-read bookseller, and to see what new light he could throw upon it. It was a homage palatable to John Morley, even when paid to him by gaping rustics. But to-day, even while he listened, and advised, and adjudged, there was a calm sweet under-current of thought, following his young wife in the progress of her day's journey.

When the hour came for closing the shop, it brought also the time appointed for attending a week-night service

at his chapel. He posted his letter on the way, with a silent blessing in his heart upon her who should open it. An unusual fervor was kindled in his spirit. He saw, close at hand, the answer to his many prayers. Rose would come back to him, from the solemn death-bed she was gone to witness, changed just as he would wish her to be changed, not in sweetness of temper, nor even in buoyancy of spirits, but weaned from the world, and purged from earthly tastes and longings. He almost regarded this death as being expressly ordained for the conversion of his wife. Wrapped up in the vivid realization of the scene now being enacted before her eyes, the words of the old preacher fell unheeded upon his ears, and when the hour's service was ended he awoke from his reverie with a start of surprise.

Mr. Waldron joined him on his way home, and having some subject of church discipline to discuss, in which they were both interested, he entered the house with him. A tacit and cool intimacy, rather closer than a mere acquaintanceship, had sprung up between them of late, which both would probably have been slow to admit. John Morley on the one hand, a scholarly, studious man, whose whole life had been given to dipping into varied studies ; and David Waldron, on the other, a hard-headed, parliamentary debater, caring little for general literature, but living his public life for the sole purpose of protecting and advancing the interests of his denomination. Sometimes the latter picked up thoughts and arguments from John Morley, which told well in his own brief but weighty utterances in the House. So Mr. Waldron sat down familiarly upon the bookseller's hearth, and foot to foot and elbow to elbow discussed with him the questions which interested him most.

The two men were so utterly absorbed in their con-

versation that neither of them heard a gentle rap, which was repeated two or three times, before the door was pushed open, and Hester appeared on the threshold. The little girl had been undressed, but she had put on her frock over her nightgown, and slipped her bare feet into her shoes. She stood still in the doorway of her father's room, holding a letter in her hand. It was a more extraordinary apparition in the eyes of John Morley than of Mr. Waldron.

"What is the matter, Hester?" asked her father hurriedly.

"Come in, Hetty," said Mr. Waldron; "come here, and speak to me. Why I've had a little girl of my own, so you need not be frightened at me."

Hester advanced into the room, and shook hands with the great man; and then she went on to her father's side with the letter she was carrying.

"Father," she said, "I was just getting into bed when I found this letter on the pillow, and a slip of paper with it to tell me to give it to nobody but you. So I thought I'd better bring it downstairs to you at once."

It was directed to him in his wife's handwriting, but for an instant his mind was full of the argument with which he had been about to reply to Mr. Waldron. The child lingered at his side, with her eyes fastened upon the letter, waiting for him to open it; but not until he had finished his reasoning, and brought it to a triumphant climax, did he rise from his chair and take the letter to the lamp to read it.

"Hester," said Mr. Waldron, by way of improving the occasion, and speaking a word in season, "do you ever forget to say your prayers before you go to bed?"

"No," answered Hester, with a look of surprise, "never. Do you, Mr. Waldron?"

It is possible that he did. At any rate he did not reply with the same promptitude that Hester had done, and he answered only by another question.

"What have you prayed for to-night?" he asked.

"I asked God to-night," answered Hester, "to be good to all very wicked people, and change their hearts,—robbers, you know, and everybody who is very wicked. I used to wish that God would make Satan good. But I know better now."

The color mantled the child's earnest face, as she gazed pensively, and somewhat mournfully, into the fire. She had pushed back her hair behind her small white ears, and stood motionless, with her arms drooping, and her head bent in an attitude of dejection and melancholy, which touched even Mr. Waldron's blunt nature. He was searching for something to say which should chase the gloom from her childish face; when all at once, without sound or sign beforehand, John Morley fell heavily to the ground.

It was as if some mighty invisible hand had struck him down with a blow. He had fallen backwards, and lay apparently lifeless upon the floor, grasping tightly in his fingers the letter which he had been reading. His face, always pale, had lost all that looked like life, and from under his half-closed eyelids the glazed eyes showed themselves without lustre or consciousness. In an instant Hester was on her knees beside him,—neither helpless nor frightened, as other children might have been, but with the sad self-possession of a woman. She raised her father's head, and placed under it her little arm, looking up pitifully into Mr. Waldron's face.

"The servant!" cried Mr. Waldron, running to the door; "we must send for the doctor, Hester."

"There is nobody in the house but me," she answered,

"unless Lawson is upstairs in the top room. Martha is gone out this evening."

"What can I do?" he exclaimed, running back again, and stooping over the lifeless man; "I cannot leave you alone. Is it a fit of any kind, Hester?"

"I don't know," she said "but please put your arm here, while I look if Lawson is upstairs." He did as she bade him, and she darted swiftly out of the room. Mr. Waldron's eyes strayed from the pallid face resting upon his arm to the half-unfolded letter still griped firmly in John Morley's stiffened hand. He had neither wish nor intention to read it; but three or four words caught his eye unawares, which sent the blood out of his shrewd, hard face, and set his calm, honest heart beating heavily, like the blows of a sledge hammer. He drew towards him a cushion and hassock, and rested John Morley's insensible head against them; while with some difficulty he loosened the closed fingers and released the letter. In his turn he carried it to the lamp, and held it with a shaking hand to the light. It began abruptly:

"I am the most wicked and shameful woman you ever knew. Oh, why was I born so wicked? or why didn't I die when I was only a little child like Hetty?"

"How good you were to me the other day! You suffered me to kneel at your feet, and kiss your hand,—only you did not know how wicked I was; and all the day long, while I sat looking at you, you never lifted up your head without a kind word and a smile for me; your head which is going gray, and which ought to be held in honor by everybody about you. Oh, why did you not choose a wife who could not have been so wicked as to bring dishonor upon you? You are so good and wise,—only not wise in loving a shameful thing like me. It is all like a dream,—a very horrible and dreadful dream,—from which I can never awake, and find that it is only a wicked dream. If I could only be what I was when you married me! If I

could only be what I was three months ago ! If I could only have seen beforehand how I was being led on,—how we were both being led on by Satan,—oh, I should have turned back quickly, and found a shelter by your side. But it is too late now.—forever !

“ I have gathered up everything which could remind you of me, and if I could I would have destroyed that room, which was mine, and which must remain under your roof. I did ask God if He could not destroy it, as He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrha. But even God cannot separate good from evil,—even He cannot punish me and spare you.

“ I do not go away to be happy. I go away because to stay longer in your home is to be guilty of a greater wrong against you. Robert takes me away with no thought of being happier, but because he can do nothing else. Oh, I pity you ; I am angry for you ; I could smite myself to death, if that would do you good. But after death is the judgment, and I am afraid of the judgment.

“ Oh ! why did you marry me ? Hester told me once how his father, Robert's father, came to you, and exhorted you not to marry a godless woman. Yet you did. There was nothing in common between us. You took me out of the old, merry, careless life, and brought me into a new one, one where I could scarcely breath. It was all gloom, and darkness, and silence to me, till Robert came. And then there was a light which dazzled me, and I saw nothing. And now there is complete darkness, that utter darkness into which the outcasts are driven. Oh, God ! ”

“ Oh, God ! ” echoed Mr. Waldron, with a groan. There was no other word added to Rose Morley's letter, and no other cry was uttered by the lips of the man who read it. He laid it down, and tried to think ; but his usually clear brain was in amaze, and his confused thoughts resolved themselves again into the same simple, deep, unfathomable cry, which left everything to be divined by the heavenly Helper ; and once more his quivering lips breathed, “ Oh, my God ! ”

“ What is the matter ? ” asked a voice beside him, and

turning his gaze away from the letter in his hand, he saw Hester at his elbow, straining her eyes to read her step-mother's writing. Lawson was looking on with a wild, half-crazy expression, and he too came forward as Mr. Waldron remained silent and stupefied.

"What is the matter with my master?" he asked. •

Before Mr. Waldron could frame any reply, John Morley gave the first token of returning life by heaving a profound sigh. Hester was upon her knees beside him again in a moment, pressing her small cold hands upon his burning forehead, and speaking to him in quiet tones. He lay still for a few minutes, but after awhile he pushed her on one side, and staggered to his feet. He confronted Mr. Waldron; and the two men looked speechlessly into one another's eyes, having no need of words. The crushed and torn letter lay upon the table in the full light of the lamp. Neither of them looked at it, though both saw it, and both, in their fevered brains, were repeating the words written in it. Mr. Waldron at last tried to speak, but twice his voice failed him; until by a great effort he cried, while still gazing into John Morley's face, "He is my only son."

"Leave me," exclaimed John Morley, awakening to the full shame and grief that had befallen him; "let me be alone! Why do you all stand staring upon me? Leave me to myself, I say."

"No, brother, no," answered Mr. Waldron, his voice broken by sobs; "God is our only refuge till this calamity be overpast. Let us pray together, brother."

He knelt down, and Hester knelt also. But Lawson remained standing near the table, where the letter lay open before him. John Morley himself had fallen back into his chair, in a maze of anguish and dishonor. He could not pray yet. In the whole universe there was no

one but himself and the wife who had proved unfaithful to him. If there was a faint thought of God lingering somewhere in the dark cells of memory, it was only of a Being, who either saw all these crimes without having the power to prevent them, or who was so far removed in a serene and selfish blessedness that He could pay no attention to the sorrows of His creatures. He felt as yet no need of prayer. But while he was thus lost in a stupor of despair, a prayer, mingled with sobs and tears, was being offered up for him by Mr. Waldron, who now for the first time realized how very near a brother John Morley was to him. When he had brought his broken supplications to a close, he rose from his knees, and clasped John Morley's hand affectionately and humbly. But "he spoke no word unto him, for he saw that his grief was very great."

A few minutes afterwards John Morley was left alone; and Hester was crying herself bitterly to sleep upon the pillow where Rose Morley's letter had lain hidden all day.

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CHAPTER XIII.

THE SLOUGH OF DESPOND.

IN the dead of the night the child's slumbers were suddenly broken by a light falling upon her closed eyelids. She awoke, and opened her eyes upon her father's face bending over her. He had placed his candle upon the chair at the side of the bed, and the light shone full upon him. His eyes were bloodshot and strained, and his face wore a scared and haggard expression, as if he was gazing spell-bound upon some horrible vision. He was grasping in his hand, which was already cut and blood-stained, a sharpened razor, the hard, bright steel of which was gleaming brightly. Never had Hester seen him thus visit her in her sleep before. She sat upon her pillow, and looked earnestly into her father's face, until he seemed troubled, and turned away uneasily from her childish scrutiny.

But he spoke after a little while, in hoarse and tremulous tones :

"Child," he said, "it is sometimes better to die than to live."

"Are you very angry, father?" asked Hester.

He did not answer her, but stood looking down upon her with his bloodshot eyes.

"I don't know what is the matter," she said, lifting up her hand and laying it on his neck, while he bent lower to receive the rare caress ; "I don't understand what has happened ; I am only a little girl, but I am your own daughter ; tell me what is the matter, father."

"She is gone away," he answered, trembling and shivering; "Rose has left me!"

"I know she is gone away," said Hester, drawing down his face to her lips, and kissing it; "but she only went away this morning, and she is coming home again soon."

"No, never!" he cried, falling down on his knees, as if his failing limbs could no longer support him. "I shall never see her again; she will never sleep again under my roof."

As he spoke of it, the extremest tension of his anguish gave way a little. He continued kneeling at Hester's side, repeating dully in a half whisper that Rose would never sleep again under his roof. The moment of temptation, in which it had seemed better to die than to live, was past; and with a man like John Morley could not return. He turned himself, with blind and dumb disgust, towards the life that stretched before him, which he must traverse, bowed beneath his burden of shame. He dreaded to open his eyes or utter a word, lest a full torrent of misery should break over him to overwhelm him at once. The image of Rose was before him, with all the fatal charms that had beguiled him into his second marriage; but behind it there rose a sweet, pensive, saintlike face, which had been fading from his memory, but now came back as if to reproach him. He felt that he ought to hate his second wife the more bitterly, because she had usurped and betrayed the place of Hester's mother.

"Hester," he said, "we must forget that this woman has ever lived with us."

As if he could forget! He laughed harshly after speaking the idle words. Would not the remembrance of her, and the shame which was the only dower she had brought him, be the food of his thoughts night and day?

Would he not eat, and sleep, and read, with the remembrance of her infamy always before him? It was a horrible unheard-of thing to happen to him. He had known that such sins were, but only as a thinker and philosopher. He had contemplated them afar off, as one of the many social problems which were altogether apart from himself, and which could never enter the sphere where he dwelt. It was a loathsome leprosy, to be looked at from a distance; but it had never entered his heart to conceive of the tainted hand touching his, or the foul lips breathing the atmosphere of his own home. He felt himself caught in the infected meshes. He abhorred himself, and his dwelling; that dwelling from which Hester's mother had passed peacefully away into her hallowed rest. This woman had dragged him down with her own fall; for he had made her "bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh."

He put away, but gently and reverently, Hester's arm, which still lay upon his neck, and he turned aside his face from her kisses. He identified himself so fully with the woman who had dishonored him, that it seemed to him sacrilege to suffer the innocent young lips of his little daughter to be pressed to his. The paroxysm of passion in which he had sought her room, resolved that neither of them should outlive the first night of his shame, was past forever; but none the less was his heart crushed down and hardened. A barrier seemed raised between him and his child. He had done her an irreparable wrong in putting into her mother's place a stranger, who had brought an ineffaceable stigma upon them both. For, in the time to come, he could foresee it clearly, the world would not be too careful to remember, that it was not her own mother who had fallen into the slough. The sting of that thought pierced him yet more poignantly than any other. Hester's mother would be dragged down from her fair and

holy place in the heavens, and be confounded with this lost, false creature, who had sunk so low into the abyss, that even he, forced to gaze down into it, could not fathom all the degradation and vileness of it. Hester was looking at him with the clear, pure, sweet eyes of her mother, and he could not endure to meet them. He took up the light abruptly, and left her to weep and sob in the darkness.

For a whole week the house of John Morley was closed as if it had been the house of the dead. People who went by, and saw the shutters all up, and the light excluded, made haste to repeat to one another every detail which the town's gossip could supply. The servant of the desolated household had a few choice particulars to add to the common stock. John Morley had shut himself up in his office, and refused to see any one, even Hester herself. But, at night, when he supposed everybody else to be wrapped in sleep, he roamed to and fro restlessly in the house. It may be he sought then to discover if any trace was remaining of the residence of Rose in his home; but, if so, he found none. The only memorial of her presence there was the closed door of the room, the key of which she had carried off with her, and which he could only enter by a force and violence from which he recoiled.

CHAPTER XIV.

SINNERS AND JUDGES

WHEN John Morley returned, as time compels all to do, to his ordinary life, there were some marked changes in him. Not only his face bore the scars of a mortal conflict, but his daily conduct still more plainly testified to the hard gripe of shame upon him. He withdrew peremptorily from every office in the church which brought him into prominence ; and would occupy no position in it, except that of the humblest member. He declined to give his counsel, as in former times, to the numerous clients who had found it less costly and less formidable to turn into John Morley's shop than to seek the doctor or the lawyer. He ceased to care for his business, was apathetic and forgetful. The gravity which had characterized him was become an unbroken and joyless gloom, which took sorrow to its heart, and prostrated itself before despair.

On his part, Mr. Waldron also had suffered a severe shock ; but the sin of a son is not equal to the dishonor of a wife. Religious as he undoubtedly was, a righteous man who strove to judge righteously, the world's estimate of his son's conduct could not fail to influence him, and to appease in some measure his anger and sorrow. Robert might at any time repent, shake off his sin, and come back to social life, to be welcomed there without reference to his youthful indiscretion. He might enter upon a public

career as useful and more brilliant than his father's, and not a voice would be lifted against him. Mr. Waldron mourned over his son, but there was no bottomless depth of anguish in his soul. He could gaze down into the gulf into which he had fallen, and see there a path, toilsome it might be, by which he could climb up again into reputation and honor.

Miss Waldron looked upon her brother's sin as a cross expressly constructed for herself, and weighing more heavily upon her than upon any one else. She grew a hundredfold more terrific in her Bible classes and mothers' meetings; and expatiated with extreme unction upon the judgments of Heaven. The religious poor generally enjoy being alarmed. They have been driven out of some of the strongholds of superstition, which are not without their charms; and they like to taste again the thrill and creep of awe, with which they were wont to glance back over their shoulders for the hobgoblins of former times. Miss Waldron invited them to peep with terror into the mysteries of Divine judgment; and she became popular with them. A great work began in her classes; and she said that her brother's fall had been the conversion of many souls.

Miss Waldron took a profound interest in John Morley and Hester. She felt it almost as a personal insult that the dishonored husband would not suffer her to probe his deep wound. It was a symptom over which she shook her head ominously. But Hester was easily reached. She even carried her down to Aston Court one day, when she met her going out for a walk, that she might have a long uninterrupted opportunity with her, and make such an impression upon her tender mind as time would not be able to efface. She set Hester on a high, straight-backed chair, opposite to the harsh portrait of Luther, and addressed her in deep and awful tones:

"You have lost your step-mother," she began.

"Oh," interrupted the child eagerly, "tell me what has become of her, and what she has done. Nobody will speak about her to me, and they say I must never, never mention her name again."

"She has done," said Miss Waldron, in a tone of concentrated bitterness, "the greatest, vilest, foulest sin a woman can commit. She will never come back, and if she did, none of us ought to look at her, or speak to her. In olden times she would have been stoned to death; yes, stoned to death; and you and your father would have been the first to cast a stone at her."

"No, no," cried Hester, bursting into tears: "I know now what you mean. She is like that poor woman who was very wicked, and they brought her to Jesus; and He said, 'Let him that is without sin first cast a stone at her.' And not one of them could cast a stone at her. It would be the same now if she was here, and Jesus Christ. There would be nobody that would dare cast a stone at her; not even you, Miss Waldron. And now, if you please, I should like to go home."

Hester did not linger for permission, but walked straight out through the glass doors, and along the terrace, and up the park, her heart swelling with childish grief and indignation. When she reached her father's house, she crossed over to the opposite pavement, and stood for a minute or two looking at it with tearful eyes. It had always been a dull, gloomy, low-spirited looking house; but now, with the large casement on the upper floor closed with shutters, it seemed more cheerless than before. The faded books in the shop windows, which had not been moved since Rose had fled, and the panes stained with the dust and the rain, were very mournful to look at; and they affected Hester as if they had been living things,

conscious of neglect. Her feelings were not very definite, but there was a sort of yearning pity towards the deserted old place, which seemed abandoned by the sun and all cheering influences. She wished to herself that she could comfort and revive the poor, decayed dwelling ; yet it required an effort to cross over again, and enter it as her home. There was not a sound to be heard within. She peeped into her father's room, and saw him sitting there in grey and grim silence, with his arms crossed upon his breast and his head drooping ; awaiting in this attitude the entrance of any chance customer, which disturbed him but seldom, as his neighbors yet shrank from intruding needlessly upon his grief. Hester closed the door gently, and stole up the creaking old staircase, and through the empty rooms to Lawson's attic. He was stooping over his press in the window ; but the ardor with which he had formerly pursued his work was dead, and his withered face was wrinkled with anxiety. Hester mounted to her old seat, which had been so long deserted, for while Rose had lived in the rooms below she had rarely ascended to Lawson's workshop, and never stayed there long. She wished Lawson to be the first to speak ; but he was in a silent mood, and for some time his work went on, without a word being spoken on either side.

"Lawson," asked Hester, after a long perseverance in silence, "what do *you* think about my mamma, my step-mother you know?"

"Don't trouble your little head about her," answered Lawson ; "you just think about your own mother. I'll show you her picture again."

"No," interrupted Hester, as he was about to reach down the portfolio, "I want you to tell me truly why people talk so about her. They point at me in the streets ; and I heard a woman say, 'I hear that's her little girl, poor

thing !' I wish to know what it is all for ; and I mean you to tell me, Lawson," she added imperiously ; " how am I to know what I ought to do, if I don't know what she has done? She was just as kind, and as good, and as pretty when she went away that morning as she ever was. Tell me directly, Lawson."

She had descended from her seat on the step-ladder, and was standing before him drawn up to her fullest height, with her head thrown back in an attitude of childish authority at once amusing and graceful. Lawson sat down on a high three-legged stool, which was his ordinary seat, and confronted her, his sallow skin flushed with a dull red, and his eyes not meeting hers, but fixed upon some point behind her, as if he saw, and was speaking to, some person, who stood at the back.

" I'd tear my tongue out," he said, " before I'd tell the child. But if I knew where that woman was, I'd follow her to the world's end, and strike her down dead. As long as she's alive, she's the master's wife, and I know you cannot come back till she is dead. Only give me time, and I'll see her dead at my feet."

" Lawson, Lawson," cried Hester in affright, " who are you speaking to? What are you speaking about?"

He lifted himself up slowly, and set doggedly to work again, turning a deaf ear to all Hester's questions and entreaties. Before him on the press was a volume bound in purple morocco, the title of which he was lettering in gold. One after another, he took up mechanically his stamps of old English characters, and pressed them upon the gold leaf. He did it carefully, yet with an air of abstraction, and his thin lips moved, as if he was muttering to himself. Hester had stolen away sobbing, and the attic was his solitary abode again. When at length he polished with his burnishing tool the title he had printed

upon his work, he found there the single word, "Adulteress." An extraordinary and ghastly smile played upon his features, and he rubbed his hard yellow hands together with an air of satisfaction. But the costly binding was spoiled, and as he undid his own work an expression of **perplexity** and **disquietude** returned to his withered **face**.

CHAPTER XV.

A SUNLESS SPRING-TIME.

THE brief season of Hester's childhood was ended. By small degrees household cares thrust themselves upon her; and at a time when the daughters of other homes were still careless and irresponsible, she had begun to busy herself quietly about her father, watching for his wants, and providing beforehand for them. The old servant gradually lost her importance, and finding herself no longer regnant, she abdicated indignantly, and Hester, a woman already at the age of fourteen, supplied her place, without troubling her father with the matter, while he seemed unconscious of the change.

As for her education, that was self-directed, and almost self-acquired. She had gone to no school; for if ever the thought of it had been pressed upon John Morley, he had thrust it away with impatient agony. For the only good school in the place was the one in which Rose had been governess, and he would have felt less emotion in seeing his child dead in her coffin, than in knowing day after day, that she was gone to that school. He allowed her to choose and engage her own masters; and they came and went, and she received them and their instructions with a quaint, shrewd, old-fashioned womanliness, which often threw them into doubt as to whether she was indeed the young girl she seemed. It was an isolated life; and Hester grew so used to the shadowy, colorless tone of the old

house, that she felt afraid of venturing out into the brilliant light and ceaseless stir of the outer world.

In this heavy and stagnant atmosphere Hester's young nature was compelled to unfold all the graces of girlhood which could struggle into existence. The blossoms were but pale and few, but they were very sweet, had there been any one to take pleasure in them : a quaint, quiet, demure, and pensive girl ; her heart feeding upon fancies half romantic and half religious. One thought and memory lived within her—the memory of the fair young stepmother, and the thought of her mysterious crime. There was a memorial of Rose's brief sojourn under their roof, which was more directly beneath Hester's notice than her father's ; for the closed room, the key of which the unhappy wife had carried away, was opposite to her bedroom, in a part of the house which her father never entered. Since the night after his wife's elopement, John Morley's foot had never ascended the two or three steps leading to Hester's chamber, and the locked door, behind which were hidden all the mementoes of Rose. This room was like a grave in the house. Never did a sound come from it, though Hester, while yet a child, had sometimes sat up in bed at nights, holding her hand against her throbbing heart, and listening, as if some one might be moving about that mysterious room. No light could penetrate into it ; and the shuttered windows looked blankly out upon the sky. She was not afraid of the place, but she was awed by it : the prevailing gloom and stillness of the whole house seeming to centre there in a perpetual silence and blackness, which was the monument of Rose Morley's guilt. So long as that heart of darkness remained, the sun could not shine very brightly into any other nook of the dwelling. It was the eye of the house ; and that eye being darkness, how great was the darkness !

The years glided by, strengthening the fixed customs of the household. John Morley became formal and automatic in his habits. At a given moment of the morning his clouded and sad face and bowed figure emerged from his chamber, looking neither to the right hand nor to the left, and glided, shadowlike, into his sitting-room, where his solitary breakfast awaited him. From that time until seven in the evening he remained brooding over his lot, with no distraction except the entrance of his few customers. His business declined slowly but surely, yet he scarcely perceived it. In the almost sublime egotism of his grief, he was conscious only that time did not dissipate the clouds about him, but rather drew their sombre curtains more closely and thickly. At length, in the course of years, the sole custom left to him was that of the people of his church, most of whom were poor and little given to reading. It seemed also as if the fire of Lawson's genius was for ever quenched. The aristocracy of the country trusted no more rare and costly volumes to John Morley's binding-office. Now and then Lawson achieved a triumph, but success came only to him as a chance. Yet, in a little measure, his cunning returned when Hester brought her sewing upstairs into the sunny attic, and sat in the obscure window by his press, plying her needle busily, though with few words passing between them. Sometimes she set her own hands to the work, under his directions, and gained a rare skill in it. But, for himself, his trembling fingers could not regain their delicate workmanship, and he felt that his occupation was gone from him. However, the current of life had drifted him into quiet waters, which, if they were not sunny, seemed very safe; and the sweet young face of Hester, not quite round enough or rosy enough for her years, was a hundred-fold dearer to him than it could ever have been in the brightness and gayety

of a happier girlhood. The chief changes in Hester's own existence were regulated by the sessions and vacations of parliament. When Mr. Waldron rested from his parliamentary duties in the seclusion of the country, Hester's religious duties became a little severe, for Miss Waldron expected her to attend punctually all the meetings for females, as well as occasionally to visit Aston Court for more private and personal instruction. Miss Waldron never forgot, and never suffered Hester to forget, that their spheres in life were totally different. She gave Hester gooseberries to eat, while she regaled herself with grapes. It was something after the same fashion that she fed the souls of her scholars. There were promises and experiences too luscious for inferior palates ; grapes of Eshcol, belonging by right to the aristocracy of the church, among whom she was numbered by every claim which it is possible to possess. By birth, by rank, by wealth, by early membership, by unremitting attendance at public worship, by indefatigable labors, and by every other qualification which the most exacting church could require, Miss Waldron laid claim to the finest of the grapes ; and they were adjudged to her without a single dissentient voice.

CHAPTER XVI.

A POINT OF CONSCIENCE.

HESTER'S eighteenth birthday was come. It was noticed by no one but herself, and she kept it by buying a new bonnet in the place of an old one, which had seen long and hard service, and by contemplating her own face a little longer than usual, as it smiled and blushed back at her from the small round mirror which hung over her dressing-table. It was a spark of vanity quickly put out by the reproaches of her morbid conscience, and she went downstairs to fulfil the duties of the day more in the spirit of eighty than of eighteen.

This same day Mr. Waldron found himself hovering about John Morley's shop, passing and repassing it in a singularly embarrassed and irresolute state of mind. There had not been much intercourse between them since the wrong committed by his son. John Morley had shrunk from all contact, and he had respected his feelings, though he could not sympathize with them. Sympathy was not Mr. Waldron's forte. He argued that if he had been able to support the thought of his son's sin, and, while deeply mourning it, still not to suffer it to interfere with his faithful discharge of public duties, both in the church and world, John Morley ought also to have proved himself superior to his sorrow and disgrace. He had been a perpetual and jarring memorial of the past, with his grey face and white head; and Mr. Waldron had been

naturally irritated by him, whenever he was residing near Little Aston. To-day he felt it an awkward thing, though he was a great man and member of parliament, to enter John Morley's shop, and give utterance to the words he had carefully meditated beforehand. At last he marched boldly forwards, ringing the shop-bell furiously with his quick entrance ; and John Morley, gaunt and melancholy, the wreck of the handsome man he had once been, met him and looked him in the face with sunken eyes, which glowed with a dull and sorrowful flame.

"I wish to speak to you alone, brother Morley," said Mr. Waldron, offering his hand, which probably John Morley did not see, for he did not take it.

"We are alone here," he answered.

"No, no," replied Mr. Waldron, "we are liable to interruption here, and I have much to say to you."

"Father," said the voice of Hester from the room within, "come in here."

John Morley complied by a silent gesture to his guest to enter, and he, removing his hat for the first time, passed in, and saluted Hester with the air of old-fashioned gallantry he had been wont to display towards her pretty step-mother nine years before. She had been sitting in her great chair, which stood summer and winter in the same spot on the hearth ; and as soon as her quiet reception of the visitor was over, she resumed her seat, and took up her work again. Mr. Waldron stood opposite to John Morley, neither Hester nor her father asking him to be seated. The elder man, with whom life had been a prosperous thing, looked ten years younger than he upon whom had fallen perhaps the heaviest burden that can crush the spirit of a man.

"Brother," said Mr. Waldron, in a voice which faltered more than it had done when he had addressed his maiden

speech to an inattentive audience in the House of Commons, "I am come here to ask a great gift. If the choice had been given me, there is nothing I would not have done to spare you and myself the pain we must bear to-day. But my duty lay here and with you. Will you let me speak to you?"

John Morley bowed his head as his only reply.

"My son," stammered Mr. Waldron, and John Morley shivered and shrank back, as if recoiling from a hand raised to strike him, "my son Robert, whom I have banished from my house these nine years, is longing to return. He is ill and penitent; penitent almost to despair. He implores to be no longer an outcast from his own home, and the place which will be his at my death. He is my only boy, and I am getting well into years, and my heart yearns towards him. When Absalom fled to Geshur after the murder of his brother Amnon, he was an exile but three years, when his father's soul longed to go forth to him. Do you hear me, brother Morley?"

"I hear you," he murmured in a hollow and almost inaudible tone.

"Oh, let me bid him come home!" said Mr. Waldron urgently; "his sin was great, but it was the sin of a young man. It has been punished enough. For your sake, and for righteousness' sake, I have never received him under my roof since then—my only son! It would be unnatural, unmerciful, unjust, if I refused to let him come home, now that he is broken in health, and contrite in spirit. My house is empty and desolate without him, and he is my heir. He will take my place when I am gone."

There was no answer when Mr. Waldron ceased to speak. John Morley stood with bowed shoulders and bent head, while his frame trembled like a child's, who knew not how to escape from the presence of some cruel

tyrant. Hester's work had fallen from her hands ; and the faint color in her cheeks, which was never deeper than the delicate tint of a wild rose, faded altogether away.

"Do you hear me?" asked Mr. Waldron, when the silence grew insupportable.

"I hear you," muttered John Morley again.

"Then why do you not answer me?" he cried impatiently. "I am not dependent upon your permission. I need not have spoken to you at all about my son's return. But tell me that you will give your consent to his coming back to me, after all these years."

"And she?" whispered the husband, with bloodless lips, and a face as of one upon the point of death from some slow torture.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Waldron. "he knows nothing about her. They parted, did you not know it? only a few months after she fled. He has been alone; he is alone now,—ill, repentant, suffering in mind and body. You have been well avenged, John Morley."

"But the woman?" he breathed, with scarcely a motion of his wan lips.

"I know nothing of her," was the short answer. "I am not talking of her, but of my son"—

He paused suddenly, for Hester had left her seat, and placed herself at her father's side, with her hand resting fondly and protectingly on his arm.

"You are talking of your son," she said in hurried tones, "and of your own desolation; but you do not think what it has been here, in this home, to me, to my father. You have no right to speak of desolation to us; you, who have had your duties and your pleasures as before. Look at my father if you wish to see what your son has done. Look at me. We have had no laughter, or smiles, or joyful words, not one, these nine years. If he is to come

home again, why may not she? Has she not repented, do you think? Would it be impossible to bring back our banished one as well as yours?"

"It would be impossible," answered Mr. Waldron, in a low voice.

"Would it be impossible, father?" she continued. "If she came back, as his son comes back, penitent, and suffering, and broken-hearted, could we not take her in, the poor, contrite creature? I think of her often," and Hester's voice almost failed her. "Is it impossible?"

"She can never come back," replied John Morley.

"Oh! it is not right," cried Hester, in her young energy of passion; "why should you receive your son back, if we cannot forgive her? If he comes back forgiven, why should not we open our door to her?"

"You are a child yet, Hester," answered Mr. Waldron.

"Yes," she said, "but there are some things hidden from the wise and prudent, which are revealed to babes. I would not receive one, and cast out the other. If she should ever come back, broken-hearted and penitent, be sure I will not turn away from her."

She spoke with a kind of gracious hardihood at which Mr. Waldron would have smiled any other time, but he was too deeply in earnest just now to be moved by anything apart from his purpose. He had made it a point with his conscience to obtain John Morley's permission for the return of his son; and as yet he had said nothing which could be construed into consent.

"Hester," he said, for John Morley looked like one half stupefied, "my son is truly repentant, and he implores your father to forgive him, and to suffer him to return home. He knows nothing, and has known nothing for years, of that unhappy woman. If we could discover her

we would do everything in our power to repair the past, as far as it ever can be repaired. Tell me, Hester, is your father merciful and Christian in prolonging the exile of my boy?"

His voice and attitude were full of entreaty, which had relinquished all the harshness of a claim. He listened for Hester's answer as for a sentence which would be the doom of his son. John Morley himself raised his lustreless eyes, and fastened them upon his daughter.

"My father will not banish him from his home," she said, with a singular and solemn sweetness in her tone; "what are we that any of us should refuse mercy to another? Are we not bound to forgive, who have been forgiven of God?"

"No, no!" cried her father, "you do not know what the wrong is, Hester. I cannot do it. He has cursed all my life. They have almost, if not quite—I do not know yet whether they have not quite—destroyed my soul! These nine years I have caught no passing glimpse of God's mercy. I have been the song of the drunkard; I have been exceedingly filled with contempt. Do not let me see him, Hester; I could not look into his face, and both of us live after it."

Like Mr. Waldron, he was appealing to Hester, as if upon her depended the sentence which would be final. She stood silent for a minute looking tenderly into his face, with tears in her clear, grey eyes; and when she spoke there was a scarcely perceptible tremor in her voice, though her answer was steady and definite.

"He must come home," she said; "he would come, sooner or later, if you withheld your consent. But he must not run the risk of meeting you. He must promise never to enter our chapel, or pass up and down this street and then you will never see him. Let him come home, if

he will, but he must not intermeddle with us. You would consent to that, father?"

"Yes," he answered, reluctantly.

"And you, Mr. Waldron?" she continued. "Do you understand our condition, and will you agree to it? If he will but keep away out of our sight he will not greatly stir our old grief. You agree to it?"

"Yes, yes!" he replied, eagerly; "he shall never come across your father, Hester. God bless you, child! But shall we never see you? Will you not come down sometimes to see us, as you used to do? Could you not forgive my son well enough to speak to him, and tell him that you have forgiven him? You remember him, Hester?"

"I remember him well," she said, sighing; "I have not much to remember. Yes, I forgive him, and I forgive her also. Only I do not wish to see him again. But if I knew where she was, I would seek her out, and let her know that I had not deserted her."

"You will feel differently when you are a woman," said Mr. Waldron.

Hester shook her head, with a faint smile in her eyes, and went back to her chair and her sewing. There followed a silence which told Mr. Waldron plainly enough that it was time to go. He looked round the room, dark, shabby, and bare, with the wear of nine years upon it since he had last stood within its walls. He glanced at John Morley, upon whom a premature old age had fallen, more decrepit than that of years. Hester herself, pale, subdued, and womanly, bore a burden of years which had pressed hardly upon her in the passing. He saw the work of his son for whom he had been pleading; and his heart felt heavy in spite of his success. His own home might lose the light cloud which had overshadowed it, but what could ever chase away the thick gloom which had fallen upon this

hearth? He had attained his purpose ; but he went away saddened, and occupying his shrewd head with schemes for the welfare of John Morley and Hester, which had little chance of fulfilment

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN.

ROBERT WALDRON'S long banishment of nine years had not been without alleviation or enjoyment. He had satiated his restless love of travel, which had been the fever of his youth ; and now, at the age of thirty-three, he felt quite willing to settle down into the luxurious order of an English home, and to enter upon the pleasant occupations of an English gentleman. His father had by no means misrepresented wilfully his condition as one of remorse and contrition ; he was convinced that his son was repenting in sackcloth and ashes for that long past sin, which was kept so vividly in mind by himself and John Morley. Nor had he been altogether deceived in this matter. There were seasons when Robert Waldron's volatile nature was plunged into profound depths of self-reproach, very closely allied to repentance. At these times, having no reticence, he appealed to his father for sympathy, and made him the confidant of all the prickings of his conscience. But it was many years since he had seen Rose ; and but for the mystery of her utter disappearance, which kept alive a sort of interest in her fate, he would long ago have ceased to think of her. He wished to be at peace with both the world and himself ; and therefore the recollection of his former folly stung him at times into a kind of paroxysm of regret and compunction.

The difficulty of obtaining permission to visit Aston

Court served to aggravate his home sickness. He very well understood the point his father made of asking John Morley's consent ; and in this he had more consideration for the injured husband than had Miss Waldron, who felt her dignity infringed by the idea that her family should stand upon such terms with that of a tradesman. Readily enough Robert acquiesced in the conditions laid down by Hester. He promised to avoid any contact with John Morley, and never to go to the chapel where he worshipped, nor into the street where he dwelt. Having bound himself by these promises, he turned his face homewards with all the gladness which his emotional temperament experienced in at last gaining a long-delayed pleasure.

It was with a very keen feeling of delight that he caught the first glimpse of the formal front of his father's house, with its dark back-ground of trees. Mr. Waldron, a sturdy, hale old man not much aged since he had seen him last, was walking up and down the terrace in expectation of his arrival, and Robert called impetuously upon the coachman to stop, and sprang from the carriage to receive his welcome. The father and son held one another's hand, in the strong, stern grasp which is the acme of British emotion, and gazed without speaking into each other's face. Mr. Waldron could not suppress a thrill of pride in this fine, handsome man, no longer a youth, whom he could call his son ; and for a few minutes his satisfaction was both profound and untroubled. Yet, as second thoughts came, he felt a little disconcerted, for he had been picturing to himself a feeble, broken-spirited, shame-faced prodigal, coming back with the mournful confession in his mouth, "Father, I have sinned against heaven. and before thee." True, there was a moisture in Robert's fine eyes, and his mustache rose and fell with the tremulous motion of his lips ; but there was the rude glow of health,

and the sun-burnt hue of travel on his face. Beyond this and below it there was an indefinable air of general self-complacency, not in offensive obtrusiveness—it was no more than the gentlemanly self-approbation of one who for the time being has no special reason for diffidence—yet it was certainly very far removed from the mien of the prodigal, who needs the best robe brought forth, and shoes put upon his feet, and a ring on his hand. All these Robert had supplied for himself.

He embraced his sister with the same affectionate agitation which he had shown in meeting his father ; and he expressed with warm, quick feeling his delight in being at home. There had not been so lively a dinner hour at Aston Court since he had left it. Miss Waldron, herself became almost gay, and laughed short little spurts of laughter, like the first efforts of a fountain to play, after its pipes have long been closed up. Mr. Waldron found his taste and enjoyment of humor and repartee returning, and forgot that his son was a sinner, until Miss Waldron left them alone in the dining-room. They drew up their chairs before a comfortable fire ; and then there came one of those pauses full of satisfaction, when the heart is gathering to itself all the pleasures, rare and fleeting, of the first moments of reunion. Robert's face was shining with unclouded happiness, when his father broke the pleasant silence.

"Robert," he said, sharply ; and the son looked up to see his smile vanished, and his face overcast.

"Yes, father," he answered, in some amazement.

"Robert," repeated Mr. Waldron, "I was not prepared to see you so light-hearted. This is not what your letters led me to expect. I have a hard question or two to ask you, my boy, and it is as well to ask them first as last."

The air of gay and tender sentiment fled from Robert's face, which he turned partially aside from his father's keen scrutiny.

"First of all," he said, "you must tell me truly, Robert, what has become of that poor girl?"

"Father, I don't know," answered Robert, in a tone of irritation; "I can only repeat what I have said already. She left me at Falaise, five months after we went away, and I have never heard a word from her or of her since. I have done everything a man could do for my own peace of mind; but I could never find the slightest trace of her. It was not that I wanted to see her again—we had been too miserable together for that—but I wished to make a provision for her. I would have given a good deal, either of time or money, to make sure she was not in want."

"Robert," remarked Mr. Waldron, after a pause, "I thought you were a repentant man."

"So I am," cried Robert, hotly; "there are times when I could cut off my right hand, if that would undo what I did. But I cannot feel like that always; it would have been unnatural to feel like that to-day, when I see you and my sister again. Perhaps to-morrow I shall have one of my fits, and then you will see if I am not repentant. Why will you not let me enjoy myself while I can?"

"But I do not understand fits," said Mr. Waldron, who had pursued an even tenor of unemotional life, both public, social, and religious; "a man is a penitent until he obtains pardon. Then he becomes a religious man and a member of the Church, and steadily fulfils his duty towards God and man. There is no need of fits. Are you seeking pardon?"

"Not just at this moment," he answered; but his light tone changed to one of respect, as he caught sight of Mr. Waldron's anxious face. "Dear father," he added,

"I never was anything but a graceless fellow, not worthy of your anxiety. But if you mean, have I ever prayed to God to forgive my sin towards Rose, and to save her from further evil—why, there have been whole days when that prayer alone has gone up from my heart to Him."

His voice faltered, and his changeful eyes were filled for a moment with tears.

"I wish to Heaven," he cried, as he recovered from the transient sadness, "I could do some tremendous penance, and have done with it. But what will satisfy you,—you and God? I have been away nine of the best years of my life, and I have done all I could to atone for my fault; and I am ready to do everything you can suggest. Why cannot we let by-gones be by-gones?"

Mr. Waldron sighed heavily. This was not the repentance he had looked for, the repentance which was seemly in his son, the repentance of which he had spoken almost vauntingly to his minister. There was a doubt in his mind that Miss Waldron would be no better satisfied with its quality than himself; and Miss Waldron was something like a domestic pope—infallible and autocratic. Robert was settling down again into a quiet and self-sympathizing mood, which could look, through the mist of years, at the other actors in the sad drama of the past.

"Poor Morley!" he said; "what has become of him?"

"He is a ruined man," said his father, sternly; "you should see him to know what you have done. He is ruined in all senses; for I hear that he has no business, and is verging towards bankruptcy."

"We can help him there," exclaimed Robert, with impetuosity; "we must save him from that!"

"John Morley," said Mr. Waldron, dryly, "unless I mistake him greatly, will take no help from our hands. We are not in a position to do him any favor."

It was a point of delicacy which the elder man could comprehend, while the younger could not. There was a vigorous hardness and manhood in Mr. Waldron's nature, which would have rejected indignantly the aid of a dishonored hand ; while his son would have seized the meanest help which would deliver him out of present difficulties.

"There was a little girl," said Robert, in a tone of musing.

"Hester," answered Mr. Waldron, "the sweetest girl I have ever seen. She has the face of a saint—an angel, I was going to say. I often watch her as we stand up to sing, and I have sometimes thought how greatly I should have rejoiced had God blessed me with such a daughter. Not but that Miss Waldron is everything a father could wish ; I have never found any fault in her. But Hester—she used to come here occasionally—is so sweet and tender and gentle ! Ah ! John Morley is not altogether lost while he possesses a child like Hester."

"Little Hetty?" said Robert, absently ; "I remember her now. And she comes here sometimes?"

"Not while you are here," replied his father ; "I shall see her only from my pew ; and Miss Waldron will meet her at her classes ; that must suffice."

The old man sighed as if over a lost pleasure ; but he smiled once more as he looked at the face of his only son. The hard questions he had intended to ask, if there were any more, had slipped out of his mind ; and Robert was not one to remind him of them. The evening took again the brightness of its first welcome ; and the welcome of the prodigal was not further clouded by ill-timed retrospections.

For a few days Little Aston was busy with the return of Robert Waldron. The old story was raked up and sifted with keen comments and discussions. Already the

details of the ancient scandal were almost lost in obscurity ; and some persons were not sure that it was merely the step-mother of Hester Morley who had left her husband's house, and never been heard of since. But Robert Waldron, handsome, young, and rich, could not remain under censure. His father had never been a favorite, for he had come among them as a stranger and dissenter, and had held himself aloof from a town in which he had no manner of interest. But the young squire, as Robert was called, had been a boy in their streets, had frequented their shops, and had made boyish acquaintance with many of them. It was natural to him to make himself popular. Besides this, now he was come back after his long absence, he attended the parish church, instead of going to the chapel, to which Miss Waldron's carriage drove every Sunday in irritating pomp. The vicar, with his three elegant and marriageable daughters, welcomed him cordially. The small gentry of the neighborhood paid him homage as the most travelled, the most cultivated, and the most agreeable personage in their narrow world. He was no longer one among the million, as when he was swallowed up in the gulf of London, or in the stream of tourists which flooded the continent. He found himself the chief man of the place ; and he enjoyed the distinction. .

CHAPTER XVIII.

A BLOW IN THE DARK.

FOR a few months the pleasure of being flattered and courted by all about him was sufficient for Robert Waldron; and he gave himself up to it with the zest of one who had for some time been a stranger to such tokens of esteem. But there was a secret fetter chafing him. He could not bear to think that there was one street of the town where he must not set his foot, and one house which he must not pass. There was the galling and bitter feeling of not being free to go where he would. He had his hours of sentimental memory, and moments of regret which would not die, though it slept for long periods; and in both of these moods he longed to see again the house where John Morley dwelt, and from which he had stolen away Rose. A feverish desire possessed him from time to time to meet John Morley himself, and to judge with his own eyes whether he had wrought so great a wrong to him as his father described. Hester, too, stood before his memory as the grave, fair, pleasant child, of whom he had been so fond, and who had loved him with such childish devotion. The mere fact that he was prohibited from entering the chapel where his father and sister worshipped made it seem the most desirable place to attend; and he chafed every Sunday when they set out to their early service, leaving him behind for the later hours of the church. He grew to listen with morbid attention to the

tittle-tattle of chapel affairs which had formerly bored him so much, that he might catch the name of John Morley or Hester—names which stung him with a not altogether unpleasant pain.

It was not in Robert Waldron's nature to resist and master the inclination which had taken possession of him. He had never conquered any caprice. He began to haunt the street stealthily in the long dark nights of winter, after the shutters of the houses were put up, and there was no light except that of the far-apart lamps. It was an old-fashioned street, reminding him of those in foreign towns; and at night, when he was recognized by none, in his great coat buttoned up to the chin, and his felt hat drawn over his face, he came now and then upon the scenes which amused him, and enlivened the dull routine of his country life. But of the home of John Morley there was nothing to be seen except the dark walls and closed doors and windows. It stood in the darkest part of the street, in the middle distance between two lamps, and never did a single gleam of light appear upon its black front. Sometimes he remained in the doorway of an empty house opposite, smoking his cigar, while he awaited some token of the interior life; but there came none. All was black and still as a grave. It became at length a necessary penance to him to haunt the mournful dwelling, and keep a sentinel's watch upon its doors and windows. He would leave the comfort and repose and shelter of his father's house to march with heavy steps to and fro before this house which he had made desolate, with a vague sense of atoning for his sin by his voluntary exposure to discomfort almost amounting to pain, at the same time that he was satisfying his own capricious curiosity. It was little else than the purposeless disquietude of a purposeless nature.

The habit grew upon him so strongly that when Mr. and Miss Waldron went up to London, upon the re-opening of Parliament, he stayed behind—for a few days only, he said, not caring to confess to himself the whim that bound him to the place. He soon fell into a daily routine, ending every night, when it was darkest, in patrolling the forbidden street, and smoking his cigar under the closed window of the room where Rose had left all the traces of her habitation in that house. The shutters of that window were always closed, but Robert knew nothing of that. He could not run the risk of passing it by daylight.

He was sauntering past the silent house one night, a little later than usual, dreaming vaguely as he was wont to do of the life within, with his arms folded, and his head bowed down, when there fell suddenly upon him, how or whence he knew not, a blow which felled him instantly to the ground! He made a faint effort to defend himself and to cry for help; but before he could do either, the blow, savage and revengeful, fell heavily upon his head, and he felt nothing more. He lay motionless and lifeless upon the pavement in the dark corner where John Morley's house stood, and at an hour of the night when there were few passers by. When Robert Waldron opened his eyes again, feebly and with pain, he saw only a strange room, dimly lighted by a shaded candle set upon a table at the foot of the bed upon which he was lying. A face he did not know was turned towards him with the evident solicitude of one who was watching for the first sign of returning consciousness. It was the face of a young man of about four-and-twenty, frank and pleasant, with a professional look upon it that spoke unmistakably of a medical student. A small case of instruments lay upon the bed close to his hand, while his fingers gently pressed Robert Waldron's

pulse. He closed his eyes again in a stupor of bewilderment and exhaustion, but in an instant a cup was held to his lips.

"Drink," said an authoritative voice; "it is a cordial that will revive you."

The draught fulfilled its work so well that he reopened his heavy eyelids and gazed vacantly about him. He was lying in bed in a large low chamber which he had certainly never seen before; his head was bound up tightly with fillets of linen, but when he attempted to raise his right hand to feel it, he was compelled to relinquish the effort, with a groan of pain.

"A dislocation of the shoulder," said the stranger, as if replying to a question, "and some heavy contusions about the head; done with a blunt instrument, a poker or large hammer. Do you think you can speak to me now?"

"Yes," answered Robert, faintly.

"You ought not to speak at all," said the young medical man, in a tone of regret; "but I'm only passing through this town, and I must go on in the morning. So we must make the best of our circumstances. Tell me all you can recollect before this blow."

"Where am I?" asked Robert.

"Can't tell you," was the reply; "I found you on the pavement, and I knocked at the nearest door to ask for help. The people here don't know you. Are you a stranger, like myself?"

"Stop a moment, let me think," said Robert.

It seemed an almost insurmountable difficulty to recall the events of the night; but after a while he remembered where he had been standing when the savage and sudden attack was made upon him from behind. He tried to turn his head upon the pillow so as to bring his mouth nearer to the stranger's ear.

"What is their name?" he whispered.

"I don't know," said the stranger; "there is an old man, and a girl,—very good-hearted people. They don't know you; so most likely you don't know them."

"Couldn't you find it out?" he asked, feverishly.

"Well, there are some book-shelves yonder," replied his attendant, "and I'll look to please you. But you must keep your strength to tell me what complaint to make at the police-office. You must have been set upon savagely."

"Find out the name," urged Robert, faintly.

His brain ached too much for any clear thought; yet he watched eagerly while the stranger took a book from the shelves upon the wall and brought it to the light. It was bound in crimson morocco, richly embellished, with the edges of the leaves gilded; but upon opening it, it proved to be nothing but an old dog-eared fairy book, with some of the pages torn, and all of them soiled with frequent reading.

"This is odd," said the student; "they must be lavish with their gilding and book-binding here. There is no name in it; but I'll find another. I chose one of the handsomest-looking."

He brought a second volume to the light; a Bible, fastened with silver clasps. He opened the front page, and read in a cautious undertone, with a glance towards the closed door, "Hester Morley, from her loving mother, Rose Morley."

Robert Waldron shut his eyes, and turned his bruised and aching head towards the wall, trying to realize his position; but thought was impossible to him. There was only one thing clear to his mind, that nothing must be found out about him either in the house or the town. He slowly gathered together his strength, and without turning

to the medical student, he asked, "Shall I be laid up here long?"

"That depends upon yourself," was the answer; "be calm, and a few days may see you well enough to give your evidence safely. Fret and fume, and you'll have brain fever. In the meantime, what shall I say to the police?"

"Nothing," said Robert.

"Nothing?" repeated the stranger; "you were all but murdered, man! You'll have a near touch yet; I wish I could stop and see you through it."

"Stop!" said Robert; "I'm rich enough to make it worth your while. Say nothing about me in the town, and don't let anybody, doctor or nurse, come near me. I must not be known here. Do you understand? Not a soul must know about this."

He spoke with violent and warning pains in his throbbing temples, but he uttered these sentences emphatically, and with intense anxiety. The young man had leaned over him to catch his labored tones, and continued to look searchingly into his face when he had done. "Ah!" he said, "some mystery, is it? Well, well, I'm willing; so set your mind at ease. You'll have enough to do to keep yourself calm. Neither doctor nor nurse shall come near you, unless there is more danger than I foresee. And your own mother would hardly know you. There,—be satisfied. I'll take care of you."

Robert Waldron scarcely heard the end of this speech, for a heavy stupor, whether of sleep or insensibility, crept over him again. There were intervals during the next forty-eight hours in which his mind tried to struggle towards some lucid thought and memory, but all in vain. He had a dim perception of seeing always the same good-tempered, masculine face about him and of hearing the

same gruff but not unpleasant accents whenever a voice penetrated to his brain; and he felt himself handled by strong skilful hands. But as to where he was, or who he was, or how he had been brought to this condition, or how long he had been in it, not a single ray of intelligence came across him. With no sensation except that he was all head,—and that a bruised and aching head.—Robert Waldron lay under John Morley's roof; while the house-keeper at Aston Court ascribed his absence to one of his sudden whims, and his father and sister believed him quietly and safely at home.

CHAPTER XIX.

LAWSON'S ATTIC.

THE monotony of John Morley's household had been exceedingly disturbed by this strange incident, surpassing all the fanciful events which Hester sometimes allowed her imagination to invent. That such a dark and villainous crime should have been perpetrated at their very door, in the secure streets of an English town; that an assassin should have been lurking in the shadow of their walls, seemed too incredible for belief. Yet there lay the intended victim in her own chamber, the only one which had been ready for his reception; and the other stranger, who stated frankly who he was, and where he came from and was going to, was watching over him with the patient fidelity of an old friend. He had told her that the almost murdered man desired to keep the crime a secret! but this only increased her amazement. John Morley had been scarcely moved from his imperturbable gloom, and appeared willing to accept the event as one of ordinary occurrence. He considered it his duty to appear every morning at the door of the patient's room, to inquire how he was getting on; when his voice seemed to have a troubling effect upon the almost insensible form of the sufferer. But having discharged this duty, he did not care to discuss the circumstance as Hester would have liked. He told her she must wait for the stranger's recovery before her questions could be answered; and

then he hastened to shut himself up with his books. He was no more communicative with the neighbors, who, hearing various confused rumors, found some excuse for invading his solitude. A gentleman, who was a stranger to him, had met with a serious accident at his door ; and a friend of his had asked shelter and help for him. That was all he knew, said John Morley. Neither had Hester an opportunity of talking over the marvellous occurrence with Lawson, for he had been unaccountably absent from his workshop for two days. Such a thing had never happened before in Hester's memory ; except about six months ago, when he had travelled to Southampton to meet his mother, who had lived till then with her only daughter in a small town in Burgundy. The third morning, when she found the attic empty, she resolved to seek Lawson out in his own home and ascertain the cause of his absence. She had never been to Lawson's dwelling, and, strange to say, scarcely knew where he lived. She had been so accustomed to know that he was upstairs in the attic the first thing in the morning and the last at night, that she had hardly ever thought of where he went to when he left the house ; while he had never mentioned his own affairs, more than to tell her that his mother was coming over to him now her daughter was dead. All that Hester knew was that they lived somewhere in a court, which had its entrance nearly opposite the chapel at the top of the old-fashioned street.

She found admission to the court by a low narrow passage between two shops, where she had to walk carefully in semi-obscurity, until she came to a long close strip of rough pavement, around which were built tall thin houses, three stories high and but one room in breadth. A dull and murky winter sky seemed to lie flat upon the roofs, closing them in with its gray and cold covering.

Most of them were untenanted, as was plainly shown by their broken panes and rotting casements; and Hester directed her steps towards a door which had "Public Bakehouse" painted above it. There was a small bankrupt-looking shop on the ground floor; and, as Hester entered it, a middle-aged woman, wiping the dough from her hands, came forward to attend to her.

"Can you tell me where Lawson, Mr. Morley's book-binder, lives?" she inquired.

"He lives here, Miss," she answered, "in the top story, both rooms, he and Madam. You don't know Madam, perhaps, Miss?"

"Not at all," said Hester, with a new sentiment of curiosity.

"She's a foreigner," continued the woman, mysteriously. "I charge half-a-crown more a month for that. Not that she's like a good many of them French. She's as clean as a nut; but she's queer. She has wood-ashes out of my oven, and puts 'em in a box, and sets it under her petticoats, instead of having a fire; which she'll be burned to death some day. It's six months since she's been here, and she's never set foot out of doors yet. She hasn't got a bonnet, I think; only a queer tall cap, as sets all the children to laugh. She can't speak a word of English, nor we a word of French; so we can't have much to do with one another, you know."

"She must have been very dull and lonely," said Hester, self-reproachfully.

"No, bless you, Miss!" answered the shop-woman; "she's as gay as can be, and sings like an old canary. You just hark up here."

She opened a door at the foot of a flight of steps which was profoundly dark, and Hester heard a clear.

pleasant old voice, failing a little in the higher notes, but set to a merry tune.

"That's the way up, Miss," said the woman; "but as you've never been before, I'll go on first and show you the room."

Besides being in dense darkness, the staircase was a winding one, with no single step straight, and a thick rope, rather sticky and dirty to the touch, served in the stead of bannisters. Beyond a faint glimmer from the open door below, there was not a gleam of light; and Hester only knew she was getting near the top by the increasing shrillness and vigor of the cheery song.

"I forgot to ask you if Lawson was at home," she said, checking her guide as she was about to knock at the door of the room from whence the sound proceeded. She had learned French from a master, and could read it fluently; but she was a little afraid of encountering some living Frenchwoman, who, no doubt, could speak only in an unintelligible patois.

"Oh, he's at home," was the answer; "he's been at home these two or three days, ill. Mr. Lawson, here's a young lady come to see you and Madam."

The song ceased the instant the door was opened; and a small, round, comely old woman met Hester, with a face as clear-cut and fresh and free from wrinkles as her own. She was curtsying, gesticulating, and talking with as much ease and fluency in her limbs as in her tongue. Hester stood confused and abashed, but as she advanced farther into the room, the familiar voice of Lawson made itself heard.

"It is Madame, my mother, Miss Hester," he said; "she is telling you that you are welcome."

He was seated near an open hearth, upon which burned a few smoky coals, held together by rusty hand-

irons. The room, to English eyes, looked comfortless, even for the abode of a workman. The only good piece of furniture was a bed set in one corner, which was covered with a handsome counterpane of some scarlet stuff, with a large square pillow the cover of which was as white as snow, resting upon it. For the rest, the chamber was poverty-stricken and squalid. A small window looked out upon the court, and in two other places in the sloping roof, a pane of glass had been let in, through which the gray cold canopy of the sky could be seen. Three small crucifixes ornamented the bare mantel-shelf, and a chaplet of brown beads hung on a wall near them, balanced on the other side by a portrait, painted in showy colors, of a French actress in her theatrical costume.

Hester could not make all these observations at once, for her attention was concentrated upon Lawson. He looked ghastly, his face being more meagre and bleak than ever. He could scarcely raise himself from his seat, for his limbs trembled like those of a person barely recovered from some severe shock ; and while he stood, he was obliged to support himself by the back of his chair.

"I'm not ill, Miss Hester," he said hastily ; "it's only upon my nerves. I shall be all right in a day or two ; but it was of no use coming to my work when I could do nothing. Look here."

He tried to hold out his hand, but it shook as if stricken with palsy ; and when she looked him in the face, the tears were rolling fast down his hollow cheeks.

"Lawson," she said, sorrowfully, "you have been taking opium again."

"It's only on the nerves, Miss Hester," he sobbed ; "try to talk a bit to Madame, my dear."

She turned away to look again at Lawson's strange mother. The old Frenchwoman was dressed well and

tastily, though her clothes were poor ; and she wore a picturesque cap, rivalling the pillow-case in whiteness. All her gestures were lively and flexible, as if nothing of the rigidity of old age had seized upon her joints. She motioned to Hester to take a seat beside her, and chuckled merrily to herself as she complied.

"If you would talk slowly," said Hester, trying timidly her own powers, "perhaps I could understand you a little."

"Seigneur !" she cried, "you speak my language ! Ah ! it is well ; very well. Oh, what happiness ! I will speak to you very slowly in my own tongue."

The clean old face, with its complexion as soft as a child's, was flushed with a bright color ; and her plump, shapely hands were raised in astonishment and delight.

"Ah, chère Mademoiselle !" she exclaimed, beginning slowly, but falling quickly into a rapidity of utterance which bewildered Hester ; "it is these six months that I have been here, and I have never heard a word of my own language except from my son ; never, never ! Ah ! but it is triste ; but when I feel ennui, I sing a little song to myself, or I say a little prayer to one of the dear little saints, and it is past, quite past, I assure you. My son is very good to me, and he earns a great deal of money in the service of Monsieur, your father : twenty francs a week, and sometimes twenty-five."

"Do you like England ?" inquired Hester, who felt her conversational powers limited, and was glad to ask any question which could show an interest in the foreigner.

"Bah !" answered Madame with a grimace, "I was too old to leave my country for another. I never thought of quitting France, though I married myself to an Englishman. I would not come with him when he left Paris ; but when my daughter was dead, I came to finish my life with my son, or take him back with me to Burgundy,

where the sun shines and the grapes ripen. Here the sun never shines, but it peeps out sometimes in the summer. My son has put that glass in to catch the sunshine for me ; and when we are rich we are going home to Burgundy."

Lawson shook his head furtively, as if saying, "No."

"Yes, yes, yes!" cried the old lady, whose quick eyes caught her son's by-play. "I say, yes. I will not die out of Burgundy. I could not bear to be shut up here, but for that."

"But why do you shut yourself up?" asked Hester.

"Why go out?" she said, shrugging her shoulders ; "no sun, no warmth, no friends, no gayety. The bad children laughing at me! All the world strange, and nobody to speak a word to me. No, no ; I can sing to myself here, and be as gay as I please all day long. Shall I sing a little song to you, my dear?"

She settled herself upon her chair, so as to give her hands free scope to accompany her song, with appropriate gestures. A hundred little wrinkles as fine as thread, puckered about the corners of her eyes, and her tongue so thrilled and quavered and shook between her almost toothless gums, that Hester watched its rapid movement with amazement. When her song was ended, she clapped her own hands in applause, and hugged herself with her old arms, while she laughed and nodded merrily.

Madame Lawson presented so strange a contrast to her son that Hester was almost lost in wonder. Lawson had partially recovered himself, and was looking towards her with an expression which plainly enough asked the meaning of her unexpected visit. She was glad to regain the free use of her own tongue, and she spoke in her turn with a volubility and fluency to which the Frenchwoman listened with marks of lively astonishment and admiration.

"Lawson," she said, "have you heard nothing of what

happened to us two nights ago? Do you know that some stranger, a man, was found almost dead at our very door? Have you heard nothing of it?"

"No," he answered, still apathetic from the use of the drug he had taken; "what became of him?"

"Another stranger who was passing by found him on the pavement, and brought him into our house. My father and I did all we could to help, and we carried him upstairs to my room. The other stranger—I know his name now, Mr. Grant—is a surgeon, and knew exactly what to do, and he is staying with him still. Isn't it very strange, Lawson?"

Lawson's eyes regained more brightness as Hester spoke, and he appeared to shake off a little of his lethargy as he tried to ponder over the news.

"Do you know who it is?" he asked.

"No," said Hester, "he is quite a stranger to us; a man with a thick brown beard and mustache; he looks a little like a foreigner. My father knows nothing of him; how should he?"

"How often has he seen him?" inquired Lawson, in a sharp, quick tone of interest.

"Only when he was carried in almost dead," she replied; "neither of us have seen him since. Mr. Grant does everything for him. But, O Lawson! it was a dreadful sight. I should have thought such a thing could never have happened in our town. He was nearly, very nearly, killed by some murderer."

Hester stopped, shuddering at the recollection, and Lawson did not speak for a minute or two.

"The master was at home when it happened?" he asked.

"He had come in only a few minutes before," said Hester; "he says he did not see anybody lying or the

pavement then; but he would never see anything,—my poor father! Besides, it might have been done after he was in the house; nobody knows. And, Lawson, what do you think? he is not going to let the police know anything about it.”

“Not let the police know!” echoed Lawson.

“No; Mr. Grant says he knows who struck him, and he wishes to screen him, and keep it all a secret.”

“He is getting over it, then,” said Lawson.

“Yes; Mr. Grant says he will be able to get up in a few days. I shall see him then, and try if he will not tell me more about it. I am very curious, and I never knew what it was to be curious before.”

Hester shook her head sagely, and laughed a little at her own unusual state of mind; but Lawson remained plunged in thought for some time. At last he looked up into her face with an air of deep anxiety.

“Miss Hester,” he said, “don’t you try to find out anything. There’s many a thing had better remain a secret to you all your life. I should like to know who this man is; but don’t you go asking him, or Mr. Grant either. Leave well alone, Miss Hester.”

She was neither inclined nor prepared to obey him; but she did not provoke any further remonstrance by putting her dissent into words. In her solitary and self-directed life, Hester had learned to choose her own path without looking to any authority. She rose to take her leave, promising the old woman to come again soon to see her, and submitting with a rare and sweet smile to being kissed by her upon both cheeks, though her color came and her face burned. It was so many years since any lips had touched her cheek, and then it had been Rose who had kissed her. Lawson preceded her down the winding staircase, and up the narrow entry into the street.

"I shall be back at work in the morning, Miss Hester," he said ; "and I should very much like to set eyes on this gentleman."

CHAPTER XX.

A BUDGET OF NEWS.

“LITTLE ASTON, Feb. 21. 186—.

“DEAR CARL,—‘Where is Little Aston? and whatever is Grant doing there?’ you are asking at this moment. Little Aston is a very small town, noticeable chiefly as a junction on the Midland Counties Railway, the town being nearly a mile from the station. Grant is being head-doctor, nurse, and general *valet de chambre* for a stranger who narrowly escaped assassination in the streets of the same small town three night ago. I must explain to you how it all came about. You are aware that it is my usual luck to miss my train at a junction; and this luck threw me, at nine o’clock last Wednesday night, upon the tender mercies of the good innkeepers of Little Aston. As I am not rich, I sought a more humble tavern than the great hotel in the square, and I turned up a narrow, old-fashioned, dimly-lighted street in search of one. Here I stumbled against a man lying across the pavement, who, on examination proved to be not drunk, but half dead. There was not a sound to be heard in the street. I have learned since that every other night the police are sent out of the town into the country in pursuit of poachers; an admirable arrangement! I knocked with all my might at the nearest door, and as soon as it was opened, I carried in my man, and examined the extent of the mischief done. He had been wounded within an inch of his life.

As he had neither blood nor time to lose, I demanded a room and a bed, which were immediately put at my disposal; and here I have been ever since.

"The whole affair is queer, excessively queer. The gentleman,—he is a gentleman, there is no mistake about that; dress, jewellery, etc., are first-class, and his voice and language those of a well-born man,—as soon as he recovered a little consciousness, begged me to keep this assault upon him a secret, and to remain with him until he can go away in order to avoid calling in a doctor and nurse. I have not any very particular business demanding me in any other part of the world, so I agreed to stay and bring him through it alone if there were no access of danger. I was anxious for the first forty-eight hours, but my anxiety is over now. He will do, and in another few days he and I may go on our separate ways; though I rather expect the 'Good Samaritan' will get a handsome fee for his time and trouble upon this occasion.

"The household subjected to this unpleasant invasion is as interesting as my patient. It consists of a father and daughter, with one very ordinary maid-of-all-work. I wish you could see them, Carl. Don't let Annie read this letter. The girl—her name is Hester—is different from any young creature I have ever seen. She produces upon me the impression of having always lived in moonlight, and having never seen the sun. She reminds me of primroses with the scent of spring in them, but which one knows will die before the summer sun comes. Or she is like her namesake, Queen Esther, stately, austere, and beautiful but with the pallor of famine in her cheeks as she stands meekly in the outer court before the king has stretched out his royal sceptre to her. See how poetical I grow? But this girl has been starving all her life. There has been a famine of sunshine and laughter, and music; and

she has grown up sad and pale. I should like to see her brought out into the full light ; but I do not know how she could bear it.

“ The father is a man bordering upon fifty, but he looks sixty, for his hair is snow-white, and his face seamed with lines. It is a gray mask, a dull, unnatural gray ; but it lights up at times as from some smouldering flame behind it, and you see intense light and heat in his eyes. Do you remember that story we read when boys of the Hall of Eblis, where each tortured ghost walks solitarily, with his hand pressed upon his breast, and whenever the hand is raised, one can see a heart of fire beneath ? I have thought once or twice, when I have come unexpectedly upon this man, that he was about to show me his heart on fire. He would perhaps do it to you, Carl ; but you will never come across him. He is a bookseller ; but reads more books than he sells. It is evident that money is scarce here. But who knows ? perhaps this stranger, who tells me he is a rich man, will lift them out of their poverty. Perhaps he will fall in love with Hester. If I were he, and if I had never seen thy sister, Carl, I would woo this girl, and take her out into the fullest, brightest sunshine of fortune. She shall see him soon, and help me to nurse him ; and—who can tell ?

“ I had written so far when I made the acquaintance of another member of this strange household. I was building a castle for my hero in bed here and my pale young heroine downstairs, when I heard the door very warily turned upon its hinges, and a new face peered round it. My patient had fallen asleep, and I beckoned angrily to the intruder to go away. Instead of doing so he entered on tiptoe, with his finger to his lips, and advanced into the middle of the room, steadfastly regarding the face of the sleeper. It was a small, shrunken man,

wearing a linen apron and a brown paper cap. He glanced at me deprecatingly, but persisted in disregarding my gestures until I took him by the arm and led him to the door. He submitted meekly enough ; and as soon as we were in the passage outside, I whispered in a passion (forgive me, Reverend Carl,) What the devil brought you in there?

“‘Do you know who he is?’ he asked, in a whisper also, but in a tone of horror which aroused my curiosity.

“‘No,’ I said ; ‘not the gentleman I have just mentioned?’

“‘As bad!’ he answered, with the same mysterious horror in his voice.

“‘No!’ I exclaimed.

“‘He ought not to be in this house,’ he continued, energetically ; ‘not in the same house as the master and Miss Hester, of all places in the world. He ought never to have been brought in here, and he must be taken away at once, or worse will come of it. Everybody would say the same.’

“‘Tell me why,’ I said.

“‘Who are you?’ he asked.

“‘A stranger ; my name is James Grant, and I am a surgeon by profession.’

“He looked at me searchingly—it was like being scrutinized by a sparrow—and nodded. ‘Come to my room,’ he said.

“My patient was sleeping quietly, and would probably sleep for an hour. I followed the little man through three or four black-looking rooms which had formerly served as printing-offices, for there were some old presses still left, till we reached a large and light garret. Upon some shelves there were specimens of bookbinding which would have charmed your heart, and all other biblio-maniacs ; but my new friend did not draw my attention to these.

He gave me his stool to sit upon, and placed himself upon a heap of books. There was a chair in the window, but he did not offer it to me.

"Then, Carl, he unfolded to me a story. The man, whom I found well-nigh murdered, is the only son of that David Waldron who is one of your greatest men, and a trustee of your college. Ten years ago, he, the son, ran away with the young wife of the man whose home he is now in, and the husband has never since lifted up his head or let a smile dawn upon his face. He is here, sheltered by the roof he has dishonored; owing his life to the prompt humanity of the household he has wronged.

"My mind stopped there suddenly. Who, then, was the enemy that struck the blow—the deadly blow which nearly killed the man whom John Morley must needs hate? It seems that young Waldron only returned to his father's house a few months ago, on condition that he never set foot in the street where John Morley lives. What then brought him where I found him, at their very door? Whose hand but John Morley's own could have been lifted against him?

"‘He must be taken away,’ said the little man, trembling with excitement; ‘you must get him away at once. Suppose the master should see him again, and know him! or Miss Hester!’ Just then we heard the rustle of a dress on the staircase, and a step so light that we could hardly hear it. The workman rose hurriedly and placed a gorgeous book in my hand. It was a marvel of curious binding, with gilding as fine as gossamer and as rich as lace.

"‘Yes,’ he said, as Hester glided softly into the attic, ‘it is very costly. Ah, Miss Hester! this gentleman is looking at some of my old work. But I can’t do anything like this now, sir. My hand is not steady, and my eyesight is growing dull.’

“‘I am learning this work myself,’ she said to me, with a faint smile ; ‘but are you able to leave your charge? Is he so much better?’

“‘He is going on well,’ I answered ; ‘so well that he will soon be able to tell us something about himself. Your father and you must wish to know who he is?’

“The workman looked at me over her shoulder with an air of warning and entreaty.

“‘I wish to know,’ she said, ‘and so does Lawson here ; but my father cares very little about anything. He inquires after him, as you know, every day, and that is all.’

“I understood perfectly this absence of curiosity in John Morley.

“‘Do you know who he is yet?’ she inquired.

“‘He has not been well enough for me to ask him any questions,’ I answered, ‘and he is quite a stranger to me. But I will ask him soon. He ought to communicate with his friends.’

“‘It would be well,’ she replied, with that dignity which reminds me of Queen Esther, and then she unfolded a large apron and sleeves, and attired herself in them for her singular occupation. I remained a few minutes watching her. I took up mechanically a short but heavy iron bar, technically called a pin, with which the binder screws and unscrews his press. It crossed my mind that such as this might easily be the blunt instrument with which Waldron had been struck. I threw it down hastily and returned to my patient.

“He was lying awake, and looking more collected than he had done since his accident. His eyes were clear, his pulse steady, and his face, though colorless, perfectly calm. As well as he could, he was promenading his regards, as the French say, about the room. It is a pleasant, simply-furnished chamber, with no ornament

except the splendidly-bound volumes I have already mentioned. He was in a mood for talk; and I told him at some length who I am, and how I came to be at Little Aston in the right nick of time for him.

“‘Do you see much of the people of the house?’ he inquired.

“‘Not much,’ I answered; ‘they are poor, and we give no little trouble in the house. They keep only one servant, and Hester has to work hard herself; especially since we two have been here.’

“‘Hester!’ he repeated, in a low tone; ‘is she a little girl, demure, but merry at times? I fancy I know something of her and her father. Have they seen me, either of them?’

“‘Yes,’ I said, ‘they have both seen you, and say you are a stranger to them. But Hester is not merry. Merry! she has not laughed these ten years, I should judge.’

“He winced, and turned his head away uneasily.

“‘I want to see her,’ he said, fretfully, and as if speaking to himself. ‘I must tell little Hetty who I am. I could tell it to her; some good might come of it. Besides, I must see her; I have thought of nothing else since I knew where I was. I must and will speak to Hester.’

“He did not talk any more, but fell into a restless sleep, muttering to himself that he must see Hester. I am watching beside him now. The night is come on, and the house is as silent as a grave. I long to stamp heavily down the stairs, slam the doors, and whistle loudly; but the instant I set my foot out of this room the gloom conquers me. I tread on tiptoe, and close the doors as quietly as if some one lay a-dying somewhere. It has been a long dying here, Carl,—a lingering death of ten years, and it is a man’s heart that has been slowly breaking. It

would have been more merciful to have killed him at once. I pity greatly John Morley.

“Good-bye, old fellow. Write me a sermon for my romance. We ought to go through life together, you and I,—to you the souls, to me the bodies. Together we might heal many sicknesses.

“GRANT.”

CHAPTER XXI.

HIS ONLY ENEMY.

WHILE Robert Waldron had been lying in a state of stupefaction bordering upon delirium, he had possessed a dull but constant realization of the fact that he was in John Morley's house. There was, it is strange to say, a species of satisfaction to him in this. The place which he had been forbidden to approach had become a shelter to him, and had received him into its most intimate recesses. He could hear, night and morning, John Morley's footsteps upon the stairs; and he listened with a thrill of interest and a momentary triumph that he could hear it. The soft sweet voice at his door was the voice of the little Hester whom he had loved with the delicate and chivalrous fondness which young men sometimes feel for children just entering upon girlhood. There was a vague, weak gratification in knowing that he was with them,—in the house where he had come and gone as a familiar friend in the days long gone by. In his stupor, he was not sure that that time was quite past, or that Rose herself might not come to his side and lay her cool hands upon his burning head. The past and present mingled curiously in his mind; and, upon the whole, his feeling was one of contentment in being where he was.

But when that lethargy was ended, his memories and fears awoke strongly within him. It was impossible to drive away the suspicion, soon ripening into conviction,

that it was John Morley's own hand which had so nearly deprived him of life. He had no other enemy ; there was no other fellow-creature to whom he owed such a debt, which only revenge could pay. He did not blame his assailant : he rather owned that it was no more than he deserved. But if this were true, then John Morley knew him to be lying helpless, and within his power. He was in the hands of a deadly and stealthy foe, with no protector but this stranger who had chanced to find him bleeding to death in the street. He began to be suspicious of the succor given to him. What could it all mean? Was it an artifice to avert suspicion? Or did John Morley wish to keep him yet within reach of a subtle vengeance? The more he pondered over his position, the more bewildered and disquieted he became.

In his perplexity, he at last came to the resolution to see Hester, and trust himself to her ; and for that reason he endeavored to gain and preserve the calm which Grant assured him was essential to his speedy recovery. There were three wills at work in the house : Robert Waldron had resolved to see Hester, and speak with her ; Grant was decided that it would be best and wisest to get him away from the place without letting her know who had been their guest ; while Hester herself, in the newly-awakened stimulus of curiosity, was bent upon discovering all she could concerning their strange inmate.

At last the day came when Grant announced to Robert Waldron that he was well enough to spend an hour or two in another apartment. He shuddered at the idea of entering once again the room where he had spent so many hours with Rose. But Grant was not the man to whom he could confide his story with its episode of guilt. And had he not longed to see the place again? Had he not thought might be part of the penance which, in some measure, by

its sharp pang, would atone for his sin? He strung up his nerves, bade his heart be strong, and leaning tremblingly upon Grant's shoulder, left the chamber where he had been lying, half unconscious, on the edge of the grave.

The room to which he was conducted was scarcely larger than a closet, and contained only a very small table and two chairs: one of them the large antique chair, with high back and sides, which had been bought years ago for Hester's mother, and which had never since been moved from its station on John Morley's hearth. He sank into it exhausted. It was not until Grant had left him, asleep as he supposed, that he opened his eyes again, and gazed about him anxiously. His seat was set opposite to a small window, the view from which was dismal: an outer staircase, black with smoke and rot, leading up to a discolored door, about which clustered some dingy ivy-leaves. This closed door, and the mournful leafage about it, fascinated him. It seemed to fill the little casement; for without going closer to it, nothing could be seen but this one gable with its blackened and worn-out steps leading to it. He could see, by the rust upon the handle and by the overgrowth of sickly tendrils stretching across the doorway, that it was a place fallen into disuse—a mere lumber-room shut up for long months together, and left to the dust and mildew; yet none the less did his mind, weakened and dizzy, imagine that there lurked in it some scene which it was necessary for him to see, and which would all lie before him, plain and intelligible and full of interest, if only the rotten panels of the door would give way. Somewhere outside the sun was shining, and in the grate a cheerful fire was crackling; but in spite of the light and warmth, he shivered as one shivers sometimes at a ghastly thought in the depth of a winter's night.

Day and night John Morley's house was a haunted house for him.

Robert Waldron started with nervous and guilty dread as the latch of the door clicked softly before it was pushed quietly open. He turned his eyes, large and sunken with his illness, upon the doorway, wondering who might be about to enter ; for it was never with this slow caution that Grant came in. A girl's face looked in for a moment before advancing : a fair, grave face with a color upon it, soft and clear and delicate, and a light in the large gray eyes, like the shining of the spring sun behind a thin veil of mist. This surely could not be Hester, the little child whom he had been wont to nurse upon his knee, and to whom he had read fairy stories. Yet it could be no one else. He felt the sudden sting of hot tears under his eyelids. It was Hester—little Hetty—whose whole life he had clouded and saddened. He attempted to rise from his chair, but he found himself powerless and speechless. It was with an almost superhuman effort that he restrained himself from breaking out into loud and bitter weeping.

"I am Hester Morley," she said, advancing towards him, and speaking in a low and measured voice, which was somewhat monotonious in its accents, yet all the more soothing to him. "Mr. Grant told me you were going to sit here for an hour or two. Can I do anything for you? Shall I fetch you anything?"

"Stay with me a little while," he answered, stammering and hesitating ; "I have something to tell you."

"Do you feel strong enough yet?" she asked, looking at him with an expression of grave anxiety. "Mr. Grant does not know I am come, or he would not let me be here ; but I wished to tell you that you are among friends, and you need not hurry yourself to go away. We are your

friends though we are strangers to each other yet. It would not be possible to watch over any one and think about them night and day, and pray to God for their recovery, without feeling that they are friends. I want you to feel this too.

The words were spoken softly, with that faint languor of a voice which had never been quickened by either mirth or passion: but they smote upon Robert Waldron with the keenest tone of reproach. He looked up speechlessly into her face; and her clear eyes, from whose grave scrutiny he shrank, looked down pitifully upon his agitation.

"Nay," she said, "I must leave you if you will excite yourself. I told you Mr. Grant does not know I am at home, and I think he would be displeased if he found me here. So you must be calm, and prove that I do you good and not harm, then he will let me come again. My father is John Morley, the bookseller; do you know us? He thinks of coming to see you this evening; do you know him at all?"

"I used to know him a little," answered Robert Waldron.

"Every one knows my father," said Hester, with a sad smile; "so you see you are not among strangers, and you may feel quite at home in our house. I do not know many people, for I have never been out of Little Aston, and it is no wonder that you are a stranger to me; yet I do not feel as if you were really a stranger. I suppose it is because I was afraid you were going to die here; and nobody has died in this house since my mother, nearly nineteen years ago."

She stood within reach of his hand if he had dared to touch her with it, a subdued and quiet girl, as if she had grown up in the shadow of her mother's death; but he

knew well that was not the chill and the darkness which had fallen upon her life.

"Your father married a second time," he said, almost in spite of himself, and shuddering at the answer he had invoked.

"You know it," she said, "if you know my father."

"I have not seen him," he answered, laying his hand upon his heart, "these ten years."

"You would not know him again then," said Hester, mournfully; "he is an old man now, broken down and infirm; are you sure you never heard of our trouble? Everybody knew it."

He did not answer; but Hester, in the dead silence which followed, could hear the heavy throbbing of his heart. She was about to call Grant, when he stretched out his hands to her.

"I am very ill," he muttered; "hold my hand in yours for a moment."

Hester took it between both her own and held it in a firm warm clasp, waiting for this paroxysm of weakness to pass before she hastened away. The tears which had been burning under his eyelids fell in torrents; and at length Robert Waldron bent down his fevered head, and rested it upon her hand.

"Don't you know who I am, Hester?" he murmured.

A slight shiver ran through Hester's frame. There was something in his tone now which startled her memory, and she tried to free her hands from those which held them; but he was grasping them too tightly for her to disengage herself.

"Hetty!" he cried, and no one had ever called her by that name since Rose had fled; "little Hetty, have pity upon me; I am very wretched!"

The first passionate moment in Hester's life had come.

She thrust back the bruised head, and wrested herself from the grasp which held her, falling back from him as one who was an abhorrence to her. He had been the curse of her father's house ; and through the long solitary years to which he had doomed her, his sin and her step-mother's had haunted her. And now he was within the very recesses of their home again,—more than a guest now,—an inmate, thought of, tended, and cared for. The pallor had passed away from her face and the soft lustre from her eyes ; and when she spoke, her voice had the eager and vehement ring of passion.

“Oh!” she cried, “is it possible that you could be near dying, and yet not die, in this house? Many a man would have died here of grief and shame alone. How can you breathe the air my father breathes? How can you eat his bread and not be choked by it? Is it possible that any man can be so mean a thing, so miserable a thing?”

“Hester,” moaned Robert Waldron, “I am the most miserable of men!”

He lifted up to her his wan emaciated face, covered with grief and remorse. For the present he was stripped of all the self-sufficiency and pleasant palliation of his own faults, which in easier moments characterized Robert Waldron. Hester felt herself smitten with pity and compassion for him. If he had repented thus, he must have well-nigh borne the full penalty of his crime during the ten years which had passed so painfully over her father's head.

“My father must never know whom he has sheltered,” she said, in a softer voice ; “you must leave us as soon as you can, and with all the secrecy possible. No one must know you have ever been in this house, lest it should reach his ears. I believe it would kill him. Rouse your-

self, and think what we can do to prevent him discovering it."

"Hester!" he cried, "say something pitiful to me."

"Oh, I pity you!" she answered; "I pity you all,—her and you and my father; but what can I do? There are troubles which no one can lighten. They say that time will soften every sorrow; but it has not done anything for you, or my father, or for her."

For an instant Robert remembered how dim the past had grown to him.

"Forgive me, little Hetty," he said.

"I forgive you," she replied, touching with the tips of her fingers his hand which lay upon the table; "for you did not know what you were doing. Look at me; how different I should have been if I had grown up by the side of a mother who loved me. You cannot see my father or her; but me you can see, so different from what I might have been but for you."

He looked at her, standing before him with her pure young face, austere and grave, yet possessing a charm which made his heart throb again rapidly. Looking at her did not bring to his mind the evil he had committed; but he did not dare to put into words any of the thoughts which thronged his brain, and he kept a sombre silence.

"When can you go away?" asked Hester, after a pause.

"Not to-day," he said, imploringly; "do not send me away to-day, Hester."

"You shall stay," she answered, in the old soft languid voice, "until you can go safely. But my father must not see you. Tell Mr. Grant enough to let him know why you must make haste to go, and he will arrange how you can be removed, so that no one may find out that you have been here."

A half-smile crossed his face, which he had shaded with his hand as he thought how well John Morley knew who he was, and how it was that he had been struggling against death these last few days. But he could not breath a word of this to Hester ; he did not know what he dared to say to her now she knew him. He longed to hear her voice again, and to lift his eyes to her sweet though reproving face. When he did so at last, feeling the silence too painful, he found himself again alone, for Hester had stolen away noiselessly ; and his heavy and weary eyes fastened once more upon the dismal doorway opposite to him, with its smoky wreath of ivy.

CHAPTER XXII.

A PRESCRIPTION.

HESTER had to pay her price for the gratification of her curiosity. Grant had, as he supposed, made sure that she was safely out of the way before he had left his charge, to take the sleep he so greatly needed ; and she had availed herself of his absence to visit the stranger about whom her mind had been busy with a thousand painful conjectures. It had been a romance to her, but now the romance had suddenly assumed the severe and hard aspect of a reality. That which, to more distant onlookers, added to the romance, brought it for her into the practical region of an unpleasant fact. Robert Waldron, whose name was never uttered in her father's hearing, was here, separated from him only by thin walls and a door whose latch could be lifted with a touch. Hester believed in the implacable resentment of her father. He had forsaken many of the established forms of religion, had withdrawn from all prominent offices in the Church, had even given up the practice of assembling his little household for private worship, and never took into his lips the name of the God he had once professed to serve. These were signs of such tremendous import in the judgment of his minister, and of Miss Waldron especially, that it was no wonder Hester's mind was troubled by them ; or that she attributed them, as they did to an unrelenting hatred to those who had destroyed the honor and happiness of his

existence. Secretly, though troubled, Hester had rather gloried in her father's implacability, as being in accord with the high-flown romances and poems with which her imagination had fed itself. But of late she had longed for some ray of tender light, some flash of possible relenting, to break in upon the gloom of his spirit ; and now that Robert Waldron was positively in their dwelling, she was frightened. What would her father feel? What would he do? Into what might he be hurried if he came face to face with their unknown guest, and found in him the man whom he hated, his enemy and betrayer? She went slowly down-stairs, deliberating within herself, until she reached her father's sitting-room. He glanced up at her entrance with a gleam of light upon his gray face which was his nearest approach to a smile, for neither lips nor eyebrows were unbended. She went forward with an involuntary movement, as if she would take his white head into her arms and kiss the furrowed face which had so sorrowful a story graven upon it ; but caresses were rarely exchanged between them, and Hester checked her impulse. The hearth looked empty without the great chair which had kept its place there these twenty years,—her own mother's chair ; and Hester's face burned as she thought of Robert Waldron resting in it in her little study upstairs.

"Ah!" said John Morley, looking towards the empty place, "I miss it, Hester. Is our poor guest up yet? Have you seen him?"

"Yes," answered Hester, briefly.

"I will visit him myself as soon as I am at liberty," he continued, "has he made known to you his name and family?"

Hester started, and hesitated. At all risks she must keep this terrible secret from him ; and yet she was not practiced in dissimulation, and was not ready with a reply.

Fortunately he was habitually indifferent to any subject of conversation.

"I did not ask him," she stammered ; "I was afraid of exciting him. Indeed, I know Mr. Grant did not wish me to see him at all ; but I thought it would do no harm. You had better not see him at present, father ; he is still very ill. Hark ! There is Mr. Grant."

It was Mr. Grant, descending the staircase as noisily as possible. He approached the door and gave three sharp distinct raps upon it, which was answered by Hester opening it as quietly as usual. He looked in with a frank hearty smile, and spoke in one of those voices, full of life and spirits, which sound so cheerfully in chambers of gloom and sickness.

"Come, Mr. Morley," he said, "I am a medical man, and I will give you a prescription gratis. You ought to take a walk of two hours every day in this lovely country. I am going for a run now. Come with me, sir."

"And who will attend to my business?" asked John Morley, with a second gleam upon his face.

"Your business is to be well," persisted Grant ; "and how can you be well, sitting here all day long, brooding and moody, till you are capable of committing any crime in the calendar? Put up your shutters and lock the door, and write on it, 'Gone for a walk.' Take my word for it, you would not lose any custom by it. You must take a good two hours' walk every day, or you may end by being guilty of murder, Mr. Morley."

He spoke lightly ; but he looked hard at the moody man he was addressing, and John Morley's face perceptibly deepened in gloom. His fingers tightened over the ruler he had been using, and his eyes glistened darkly under his bushy eyebrows.

"More men are guilty of murder than you think of,"

he answered ; "but it is not a daily walk that will save a soul from crime."

"It would go far to save yours," said Grant, eagerly ; "only put yourself into my hands, and try it. Instead of sitting here in this dull room, wearing your heart and your brains out in brooding over Heaven knows what, go out into the sunshine and bracing air of the fields ; you'd be as far from murder or any other sin as a child is."

"You are a boy yet," replied John Morley, "and scarcely know what you talk about. You do not know what it is for God's sun to give you neither heat nor light, and for the cool winds to make the fever of your heart the hotter. But I run no risk of being guilty of murder—not I. Why me, more than any other man? or why murder, more than any other crime?"

He gazed darkly and suspiciously at Grant, whose open face had exchanged its frank smile for an air of disquietude, and who returned his gaze apparently with words upon his tongue which he longed to speak, but the moment for which was not yet come.

"Mr. Morley," he said, in an altered tone, "you told me, ten days ago, that you did not know the man whom I found nearly murdered at your door."

"No," he answered ; "he is a stranger to me. He must be a stranger in the town ; for if he belonged to Little Aston, he would have been missed. Has he told you who he is?"

"You see why I think of murder," said Grant ; "it is no wonder that my mind runs upon it. At your own door a murder was well-nigh accomplished, and the victim was only saved by a mere accident—the barest chance. It is a strange story. Has the man an enemy? Who struck that blow? Where did the assassin escape to? Where is he now? Is there any meaning in the spot where he was

almost murdered? I ask myself these questions over and over again, and I suspect every man I meet."

Grant spoke vehemently, but with a suppressed earnestness, more impressive than passionate. Hester felt a sickening dread and faintness creep over her, yet she scarcely knew what dim suspicions were taking hold of her mind. She listened breathlessly for her father's reply.

"They are grave questions," he said, calmly; "but your patient alone can answer them. It is a case for police investigation, and it should have been put into their hands at once. I suppose any other man but me would have done it. Do you not know the stranger's name yet?"

"Yes," answered Grant, still scanning John Morley's face with close scrutiny; "but I hold it as a trust which I am not to betray. He has resolved also to conceal the savage attack made upon him, out of consideration for his supposed enemy. The whole thing is to be kept a secret, even from his own family. No one will know it except ourselves, and with us it will be safe."

"It will be safe with me," said John Morley; "but this is a stranger story than before. An attempt at assassination in a quiet, remote town like this, and the victim of it is anxious to hush it up! Who is this man, and where does he come from? What does he suppose is the motive for the crime? This mystery, mark you, is being acted within my own walls. I must see the stranger and question him; it is only fitting that I should know more about it."

John Morley's face was lit up with a new expression of sinister interest and resolution. He rose from his chair, straightened his bowed shoulders, and lifted up his drooping head. Hester trembled, but she did not dare to

speak , she did not know yet what she dreaded or suspected.

The twilight had already begun to gather in this house, surrounded by so many higher walls. John Morley turned the key in his shop-door, that no one might enter while he was absent ; and as he returned to his sitting-room behind it, he said, in a lighter tone, " I will follow your advice ; I am about to leave my business to take care of itself for awhile."

CHAPTER XXIII.

FACE TO FACE.

HENRIER had only time to fly up-stairs to the little room where she had left Robert Waldron, and to lower the blind over the window to add to the duskiness of the evening. With a hurried and importunate voice she addressed herself to him,—

“My father is coming,” she said ; “oh? be so careful what you say. He has suffered so much, and from you. If it is possible, hide from him who you are.”

He entered the room as she finished speaking, closely followed by Grant. The light was very dim, and, such as there was, it fell full upon the face and figure of John Morley, so eloquent of ruin and loss and utter wreck, that Robert, who had longed to see for himself the change that others reported as wrought in him, felt his eyes fastened and held by a spell which he could not conquer. He was on his part, in the shade, and the years which had passed over him had been those which transform a youth of three-and-twenty into a man in the prime of life. There was little danger that John Morley would recognize in this bearded stranger, still wearing a bandage about his head, the gay, handsome, thoughtless boy, whom the world was inclined to blame but little for his follies and faults. But Grant and Robert Waldron were not alarmed by the fear of discovery. There was not a doubt in their minds that it was this man’s hand, thin and white as a scholar’s, but

nerved with long-cherished hatred, which had scarcely missed of murder.

"Mr. Grant tells me," said John Morley, lowering his voice to a very quiet key, "that you are now out of danger, and will soon be able to be moved. Have you communicated with your friends?"

"Not yet," answered Robert, in tremulous and indistinct tones.

"They will be anxious about you," he resumed, "and I am afraid you will find the accommodation of my house very limited. Such as it is, you are very welcome to it; but the situation is confined, and not good for an invalid. Still, you or Mr. Grant have only to make your wants known to my daughter Hester, and we will do all in our power to make your sojourn here comfortable. I beg that you will not leave until you feel quite equal to the effort."

The words were hospitable and polite, and his manner did not belie them. There was something of an antique and laborious courtesy about him,—the ceremoniousness of an old school, but it commanded respect; and Robert Waldron bowed and murmured a few words of thanks.

"But," said John Morley, distinctly, "you would do me a favor, one that you will not refuse me, I am sure, by letting us know the name of the stranger who is within our doors."

Hester held her breath to listen. It was a moment of intense anxiety to her. In all her life, immured and isolated as it had been, she had never heard a lie spoken; and now she trembled between the desire of having the truth concealed at all hazards, and the dread of having a falsehood uttered at her instigation. She had been very near the sin herself only a few minutes before; and a sharp pang shot through her as she waited for Robert Waldron's untruth. Her conscience kept the sensitiveness

of a conscience which knew nothing of the evil world outside her father's house.

"My name is Roberts," he said, unhesitatingly, "I am unknown here, and my family is in London."

"And may I ask further what you mean to do about this affair?" asked John Morley.

"Nothing," he answered.

"Nothing!" echoed John Morley, "excuse me, but I find your decision singular. Would it be possible to furnish us with any explanation?"

"Certainly," said Robert, "I believe I know the man; I could lay my hand upon him at any time. I know what has driven him to crime, and I must pass it over. He is safe from me, and would to God I could feel that he is now avenged! I shall keep out of his way for the future."

He looked up significantly and imploringly into John Morley's grey, worn face, which underwent no change while he spoke. He stood opposite to him in the dim light, his white head bowed towards him; and Robert Waldron could no longer keep back the tears and sobs which overmastered him.

"You are still very weak," said John Morley, soothingly; "and, if I have wearied you by my questions, I pray you to forgive me. When you are more able to bear it, I will speak to you again on this subject. In the meantime make my house your home, until your friends come to you, or you can go safely to them. Both you and Mr. Grant are welcome here. I leave you to his care now."

The interview had been a short one, but it was quite long enough for Robert Waldron. He had seen face to face the man who had forbidden him to set his foot in any place where he could by any chance encounter him. There had been nothing in his words or in his manner to betray that he knew him; but Robert could not doubt it.

To his mind it seemed as if there was now a tacit and covert reconciliation between them. It might be one never to be displayed openly to the world ; but there was a fairer balance of injury between them which might well satisfy John Morley's resentment. He felt no apprehension of further vengeance, though he might remain in his dwelling. If John Morley had lifted up his hand against his life, it had been in a moment of ungovernable passion, which had come upon him unawares. The man was too stricken, too impassive in his profound melancholy, to exert himself to active hate. He could not lash his heavy spirit into schemes of revenge. Robert Waldron felt that he could rest where he was in perfect safety.

Besides, the agitation of the day had thrown him back in his recovery, and he did not leave his room again for some time. While Hester was feverishly anxious to get him removed before there was a chance of her father seeing him again, he gave himself up to the fretful languor of a tedious convalescence, which was only soothed by her occasional visits to him. He preferred her quiet little study to the great empty apartments of Aston Court and the attendance of the old housekeeper. He was in no hurry to leave a place possessing the peculiar charm for him, perilous yet pleasant, which an outlaw might feel in being under the roof of the authority who has proclaimed his outlawry.

At the end of a few days, however, Grant announced to him that the time was come when he ought to leave John Morley's house. Robert had confided his whole story to him ; and Hester had impressed upon him the necessity of so effecting the removal that no suspicion should be awakened in the town. Little Aston had been very curious both with respect to the doctor and his patient ; but Grant and Roberts were names altogether unknown here, and John Morley either could not or would not re-

veal anything more about the strangers. Late at night therefore, a night when John Morley was attending a service at the chapel, a cab which Grant had hired from a town some miles distant, drove up to the door ; and Robert Waldron, well wrapped up, and leaning feebly upon Grant's arm, descended to the large old kitchen, which formed the entrance-hall of the house.

"Hester," he said, "say good-bye to me, kindly."

She put her hand in his for a moment, but would not let it linger in his clasp.

"Hetty," he said, sorrowfully, "you have not forgiven me yet."

"Oh, I do forgive you," she said, in a tone of anxiety ; "but I want you to get away. I have had no peace since I knew who you were. Do not think me unkind. I am very, very sorry for you, and I hope that some time you will be very happy again. It is no use for both you and my father to be miserable all your lives long. Good bye."

"And am I never to see you again, Hester?" he asked, gazing with a quiet thrill of admiration at the rare refined beauty of her thoughtful face.

"It will be best not," she answered ; "no, you cannot see me. You must keep your promise now, and never come near my father again. I know what you think, and what Mr. Grant thinks about him ; and perhaps it is true. But you must never come near us again. What would have become of me and of him, if you had been found dead?"

Her hands were clasped for an instant, and a fine shadow of terror crossed her face. Robert Waldron loitered still, regarding her fixedly, as though knowing it was for the last time. An old clock which stood in a dark corner of the apartment struck eight, and Hester started with alarm.

"Oh, make haste!" she cried, "go quickly, for my father will be at home in five minutes. Good-bye, good-bye."

She put her hand again into his, and hurried him to the door; but he had scarcely settled himself in the corner of the cab before John Morley came up. Grant was on the point of jumping in, and closing the door; but now he stood with one foot upon the step, and turned round to speak to him.

"My patient is very much exhausted, sir," he said, "and I should be glad if you would dispense with any farewell. We shall not go far to-night, and I will write to you from where we stop. We will not loiter any longer than we can help in the night air; so good-bye, Mr. Morley."

"Have you all you need for the journey?" he inquired.

"All,—everything," answered Grant, hurriedly; "good-bye."

"Good-bye to you both," said John Morley, raising his hat from his white head. Robert leaned forward to have a last glance at him and Hester, as she stood in the lighted doorway; and then he fell back with a groan.

Grant accompanied his patient to the country-town, from whence he wrote to Mr. Waldron in London, giving such an account of his son's accident and illness as would avoid exciting any suspicion of the truth. On the evening of the day upon which he had received the letter, Mr. Waldron was with his son, anxious for him, and grateful beyond measure to the young doctor. There was, he said, an opening for a medical man at Little Aston, and he urged him to settle there under his patronage. He was himself about to give up his public life at the close of the present session, as he felt old age creeping upon him, and his

health beginning to fail. A medical attendant in whom he could have confidence would soon become essential to him ; and he had a pleasant house at the end of the town nearest to Aston Court where Grant could reside. The young man hesitated but little. John Morley had once or twice expressed his opinion that a good country practice might be established there ; and Grant had neither funds nor influence to back him if he attempted to launch himself upon a more ambitious career. He accepted Mr. Waldron's grateful offer with alacrity ; and a few weeks later John Morley and Hester saw him appear again upon their narrow stage at Little Aston.

It was not a step altogether to Robert Waldron's mind ; but he was accustomed to let things take their course, and he did not oppose himself to this. The sole reason he could have urged against it, even to himself, was one which he could not have presented in plain words to his own conscience ; it was a very subtle and vague feeling of jealousy of Grant's acquaintance with the Morleys, and of the footing he had already gained in the solitary, and, to him, forbidden household. Hester, he thought,—for so far he dare deal frankly with himself,—was too rare and dainty a prize for a mere country doctor. He should be sorry if, after her hard and sorrowful girlhood, no **brighter and more fortunate lot awaited her in the future.**

CHAPTER XXIV.

HESTER'S ONE WISH.

WHEN Robert returned to Aston Court in the spring, with the traces of his accident almost effaced, he found Grant lodging in a house nearly opposite to John Morley's, while he waited for the present tenant of his promised dwelling to leave. He was living therefore within the prohibited precincts ; and friendly as he was with Grant, Robert had a shrewd suspicion that it would not be quite safe to visit him there. There was but little need for him to do so, as Grant could come freely and safely to Aston Court, but his residence so near to Hester quickened and fanned the almost unconscious jealousy in Robert's nature. Grant could and did see her every day ; he heard her speak ; he would, perhaps, teach her to smile, to laugh even ; and then he recalled to mind the clear, sweet, uncertain laughter of the child Hester, in those days long gone by when he had taken her upon his knee and spoken to her the words he had hesitated to address directly to Rose. If he could only hear its music again ! If he could only watch the languid lines about her lips melt and tremble into smiles ! If he could but see the light come and go in her grave calm eyes, as her young heart stirred with new and happy thoughts ! He was not in love with Hester ; it would have shocked him to have dreamed of being so, in his inmost heart. She was still almost a child to him ; and a child whose life he had robbed of all nat-

ural bouyancy and joy. He wished he could, with his own hand, put her into possession of her proper inheritance of girlish gladness ; but he did not like any other hand to do it. It went very far towards making him angry to think that a mere lad, uncultivated and poor, and with no attractions but his youth, should stand so fair a chance of doing what he could never do.

Before long Robert Waldron's vague envy took more definite form. It would be a shame, he argued, to let this pearl fall into hands so rough and coarse as Grant's, who would rob it of half its delicacy and brilliance. Though she and her father might count it no bad settlement for her to become the wife of a doctor under Mr. Waldron's patronage, it would be but a poor lot for her. They would be sure to think well of Grant's prospects and position. For, after all, John Morley was no other than a poor tradesman, struggling with difficulties ; and there was a stigma upon the name of Morley in Little Aston. The last thought stung him sharply. But then Rose had not been Hester's mother. The tie between them was very slight and had lasted only for a few months. There was positively no relationship at all. At any rate, since he could not atone for the past for Rose or John Morley, was it impossible to do something for this little Hester, the child who had once been so fond of him ? Could he not place her in some position where her grace and beauty would be better seen than in her present obscurity and poverty ? He was rich himself, having already inherited an estate from his mother, and some day his wealth would be doubled. It would be easy for him to remove Hester from her own sphere to one where life would be all gayety and brightness about her. But it would be necessary to see her often, and to make himself well acquainted with her character. How could this be managed ?

There remained yet two or three months of the session to run out before his father and sister returned to settle permanently at Aston Court ; and Robert was not at all sure that their residence there would be favorable to his views with regard to Hester. Since his return she had never been to the Court. How to meet her again, with no excitement which should alarm her, or make her unwilling to speak to him, became the problem of his many idle hours. He haunted the beautiful fields and lanes of the neighborhood, in the hope of crossing her path ; but Hester was accustomed to walking early in the morning, at an hour when he scarcely knew that the sun had risen ; and he haunted the fields and lanes in vain. It was only through Grant, who always avoided mentioning John Morley and Hester, that he could gain any information concerning her.

"You see the Morleys often, Grant," he said one day, with an air of nonchalance.

"Most days," was the curt reply.

"Living directly opposite to them, you may see them without going to the house," said Robert.

"No," he answered ; "all I can see is the window of a room where the shutters have not been taken down since I lived there. I go in most days for a chat with the old man and Miss Hester."

"*L'ami de la maison*," observed Robert, with an ill-tempered sneer.

"And the only friend," responded Grant.

"Does poor little Hetty visit nowhere?" he inquired.

"Nowhere," replied Grant ; "well, yes, at one house, and that is an odd one ; and her friend is still more odd. I dare say you have no idea that there is such a place in Little Aston. It is a back court, with an alley leading to it, just opposite the chapel at the top of our street. There

is a small baker's shop in the court, where family baking is done ; and Hester's friend lives in the top story of the baker's house. I went with her one day to visit her friend, who was ailing. The ailment was a mere nothing ; but she turned out to be an old Frenchwoman who could not speak a word of English. Hester was obliged to interpret between us, and 't was amusing enough, I assure you. I know very little of French, and I cannot understand a word she says."

"Who is she?" asked Robert.

"The mother of Lawson, Mr. Morley's bookbinder," said Grant ; "his father was a workman in a Parisian house, and married a Frenchwoman there. She only came over to live with her son a few months ago, and Hester goes to see her occasionally. It is her fete-day to-day, and she has invited me to make one of the party ; but I shall not have time."

"Is she poor?" inquired Robert, with an air of sudden interest.

"I take it for granted," he answered, "since her son is only Mr. Morley's bookbinder. He is another curious study, well worth time ; eats opium, and is a little shaky in the upper story. Hester tells me he used to see visions, and that he is greatly depressed now they have ceased. I see him often."

"I don't know the man at all," said Robert ; "but this old Frenchwoman must be a curiosity in Little Aston. I can talk any patois of French-like a native, and I think I will go and see her."

"You had better not," said Grant, significantly ; "the court is exactly opposite the chapel in our street,—you understand. You must keep away."

"That's a bore," said Robert Waldron, with a slight yawn of indifference.

But as soon as Grant had left him, he turned his steps eagerly towards the house of Lawson's mother. By making a circuit he could reach the upper end of the street without passing near John Morley's house ; and at this hour of the afternoon it was certain that he would be confined to it by his business. The alley opposite the chapel was easily discovered, but he was an apparition so remarkable in the court, that all its scanty population turned out to stare at him, and the subdued clamor of their voices attracted the foreigner whom he had come to seek, to her window. For the first moment Robert could scarcely believe he was in a town in England. The old half-timber house, with its very pointed gable surrounded by rotten wood-work, and the clear, fresh, coquettish, aged face of the Frenchwoman framed in the small lattice casement, was like a vision of the lands where he had spent so many years of his life. He mounted the winding staircase with swift steps. The old woman had opened the door, and the whole scene throughout seemed familiar to him. He presented himself before Madame with all the courtesy and politeness which go far to win the people of her country. He could speak to her fluently, and the tears started to her eyes as she listened to her native tongue.

"Madame will pardon me," said Robert, "for intruding upon her. But I know France well ; I have lived long in that charming country. Therefore I have ventured to pay a visit here, uninvited.

"Ah, Seigneur !" exclaimed Madame, with vivacity, "but monsieur is the welcome one. Seat yourself, I pray you. You know France well? You have lived there? O, *mon Dieu !* talk to me about my dear country."

Robert accepted the seat she offered him near to herself, and took infinite pains to make an agreeable impression. It was not difficult. The delight of conversing in

her own language freely became almost a transport and an ecstasy to her. She laughed, she wept, she nodded and tossed her head, she gesticulated to her heart's content, and, for the time, felt herself at home again. The hours in which Hester sat beside her, talking timidly in the unfamiliar words, were nothing compared to this golden hour when this charming stranger, so distinguished, so amiable, in so beautiful a toilette, listened to her, and did not require her to speak slowly and heavily. She had not been so happy since she left Burgundy.

"You are *triste* here," he said at the first pause in his flood of words; "have you no one to visit you?"

"No; I am never *triste*," answered the old woman gayly, "always I can think of making my toilette, and going out into the town; but that time never comes. There is rain, or there is no sun, or I have the *migraine*. But I am never *triste*,—never. I have all the dear little saints to talk to, and I say many more prayers here in England than in France; and the saints are very good company, you may be very sure. Then there is Miss Hester, my cherished one! She is coming to pay me a visit this evening. It is my fete-day, and we have a little feast together. We take tea here, because my son cannot buy the wines of France."

"You must permit me to send you some," interrupted Robert; "I, too, like the wines of France."

"But no! but no, Monsieur," cried Madame, "a thousand thanks,—but no!"

"Who is Miss Hester?" asked Robert.

"It is an angel," responded Madame, growing with hilarity; "a veritable angel! I could do my little acts of devotion before her as before a blessed saint! I adore her, Monsieur. She is perfectly charming; but *triste*, too *triste* for one so young. I say to her, 'Go to France, my cher

ished one. Go, go. There the sun shines, and one laughs without knowing why.' Her religion is *triste* ; also too solemn. There are no dear little saints to confess one's little faults to ; and it is too solemn to go always before the great God for every trifle. She should visit my dear France, Monsieur. Chut ! I hear her voice below there."

They listened in silence, and heard Hester's low, pleasant voice speaking to the children, who were playing about the door to make sure of seeing the stranger when he came out again. She came up rather slowly, step by step, as though feeling her way carefully through the gloom. Robert Waldron's heart stirred, and his pulses throbbed as they had never done before ; and he rose from his seat, partly from a restlessness of excitement, and partly to hide that excitement from the keen eyes of Madame. He placed himself in a position so as not to be seen at once by Hester as she entered ; and at the same moment a light tap upon the door announced her arrival.

She had come in and the door was closed behind her without her perceiving any other person but the old friend she had come to visit ; and Robert Waldron had time to notice, with a poignant sense of admiration, the delicate color upon the cheeks, and the sweet faint smile upon her lips, as she stooped to receive the double kiss with which Madame greeted her. When this ceremony of reception was ended, he stepped forward, calm apparently, but with a tremor through all his nerves which was strange to himself. Hester's eyes opened widely with an expression of alarm ; and she made an involuntary movement as if to escape from him, and take to flight.

"I am going away instantly," he said, not venturing to approach her more nearly ; "you are before your time, Hester. And yet," he added, looking into her candid

eyes, and resolved to cast himself frankly upon the truth, "I own I came here solely to see you, and to speak to you. Grant told me you were coming to visit this old woman to-day, and I have introduced myself here for the chance of meeting you. There was no other opportunity, and I felt that I ought to see you once more."

"But why do you want to see me?" asked Hester, not angrily, but in a sorrowful voice which made his heart beat the faster; "what have you to say to me that can do any of us good?"

"Child," he said, "there is much that I could say to you, and very much that I can do for you. Do you understand that I must do everything in my power, for my own peace of mind, if not for the sake of making your life more happy? Now that I have been in your home, and seen the wreck there with my own eyes, there will be no more rest for me until I have repaired it in some measure, however little. I could not know by any other means all that I had done; and do you suppose I can now forget it? I remember your father a happy man, growing rich, and with a successful future before him. I have seen him now, and his ruin is before me day and night."

He spoke with so much earnestness that he began to feel as if pity for her father was the real and most deeply-rooted motive of his conduct. He had no purpose to deceive Hester. He was in fact deceiving himself; and his handsome face wore an aspect of profound and solemn remorse. "And you," he continued, "the child who loved me, the little girl who used to watch for my coming and brighten into smiles when you saw me; my heart aches to see you thus. Hester, who will give you back the lost laughter of your childhood? Who can recall these gloomy days, which ought to have been steeped in brightness? If I could but call back the past, and once

more set us all as we were ten years ago, I would pay down my life gladly as the price." Hester raised her eyes to his, and read in them an expression which fully sustained the words he was speaking. It was not in her nature to doubt, and experience had not taught her to suspect. She let Robert Waldron take her cold hand in his own, and stood beside him, trembling, but calm and grave.

"Is there nothing I can do for you?" he asked, in a pleading tone; "your face always wears a look of care. Is it anything besides the old trouble? Let me speak frankly to you, my child; for you are still no more than a child to me,—the little Hetty you used to be. I am rich, and from many persons I hear that you are poor. If there be any time when money becomes a pressing want with you, will you look to me as an elder brother whose greatest satisfaction would be to do anything for you? Is there nothing I can do for you now? Have you no anxiety which I could take away from you at once?"

"There is nothing you can do," answered Hester, with drooping eyelids, and lashes burdened with tears which did not fall.

"Yet think," urged Robert Waldron; "for my sake give me something to do for you. It is to give me relief from the remorse I feel. Have you no wish which you could entrust to me? Is there nothing you want if you had the means? I am a man, an idle man, with nothing to occupy me. I would do anything for you."

Hester looked up to him again with her truthful and searching gaze, and retreated to the side of the Frenchwoman, who had been standing by with an eager curiosity, unable to comprehend a syllable of the earnest words which were being spoken. The girl's young face was as white as marble, and almost as motionless, except for the

flicker of the light in her eyes, which seemed to be kindled from within.

"I have had one wish," she said, with pallid lips that scarcely parted to whisper it, "ever since I knew that *she* was lost. You are a rich man, and an idle one, and you want to make atonement. Find her whom we have lost ; find her who loved you. I think of her day after day, and I ask God to bring her back to me every morning and night. She was so kind and so pretty ; I dare not call her good now. I wonder what has become of her,—where she is at this minute,—what she is doing or suffering. Oh ! if I had been you, I should never have given up seeking for her."

"Good heavens, Hester!" he exclaimed, "do you suppose I did not do all I could to find her? I left her at Falaise, while I came over to England on business ; and when I returned there was not a trace of her to be found. I did everything in my power at the time."

"I have read in books," said Hester, with an air of wisdom, "that it is no sorrow to get rid of a woman of whom one is tired. You were already getting tired of her, perhaps. There was no longer any pleasure in being near her. Did you try to find her as you would have done if she had been your sister or your wife who was lost to you?"

At another time Robert Waldron might have smiled at the tone of girlish sagacity with which Hester spoke ; but just now he was conscience-stricken. No ; he had not sought for Rose with the persevering energy he would have used had she been really dear to him. So far Hester's wisdom, drawn only from books, was right ; and yet he had made many efforts and taken a good deal of trouble, both at the time and since. Rose had been tolerably well supplied with money, and she was no child

when she quitted him. He had often taken refuge in the reflection that she was a little older than himself. But now that he saw Hester, wise only with the wisdom of books, and knowing nothing of real life, but burdened with an overpowering anxiety as to the fate of the missing woman, he felt as if he had been shamefully negligent in his attempt to discover her.

"I cannot talk more about it," cried Hester, a burning flush mounting to her white cheeks and her calm forehead, "but I have no other great wish. There is nothing else you could do for me." She said the last few words in a low shy tone, which penetrated to Robert's heart. He recollected Madame's sentence, "that she could do her little acts of devotion before her as before a saint." He also would willingly have knelt at her feet to make there a vow of penitence and atonement, if she would only look down upon him gently and tenderly with her grand, calm eyes, which still bore the serenity of a child in them. He resolved in himself to insure some means of seeing her again, even if she spoke only of this subject so utterly distasteful to him, and of which she spoke with such simple and innocent candor.

"Hester," he said, "I will take up this search again. But remember, it is now more than nine years ago, and there is barely a chance of success."

"Oh, you will find her," she exclaimed, holding out her hand to him again; "whatever she is, or wherever she is, you must rescue her. It will bring peace to me, and later, perhaps, to my father. When he comes to die, how horrible it will be not to know where she is, or what has befallen her! But if you find her, then I shall know what answer to give him when he asks himself some day or other, 'What has become of my poor Rose?'"

"I will go, I will spare nothing," said Robert, warmed

by one of the generous impulses which from time to time broke through the indolent selfishness of his temperament. He believed that there was no other motive at work within him, save that of an earnest desire to repair the mischief he had done ; yet he kept Hester's small hand clasped tightly in his own, and felt it impossible to resolve upon leaving her presence.

"I must leave you, Madame," he said, addressing the old Frenchwoman ; "I am about to start for your dear France, but I shall return in three or four weeks, and, if you will permit me, I will pay you an early visit. Hester," he added, in English, "it will be necessary to tell you all I do. Can I write to you safely? Will your father see my letter?"

"You can write to me," she answered ; "my father will know nothing about it. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, little Hetty," he replied ; "say, 'God speed you, Robert Waldron.'"

"God speed you," repeated Hester, with a glance into his eyes which made his heart throb again. He laid his moustached lip against each smooth cheek of Madame, with an air of gallantry as exquisitely refreshing to her as cold waters to a thirsty soul ; and, with a last look at Hester, he hastened from the poor garret, and down the stairs, as if the next instant should see him on his way to Southampton, the nearest route to France.

He did start, as soon as he could make such arrangements as would not involve confiding the reason of his expedition to his father. He had no wish to make him acquainted either with his recent intercourse with Hester, or the quixotic mission she had sent him abroad for. This mission was so utterly distasteful to him, that but a little more painfulness would have made him abandon it altogether. It was like raking among the ashes of the dead

to reconstruct a skeleton. It had not been a pleasant sin to him, even at the time ; and now it seemed likely to prove a root of bitterness which had struck very deeply indeed. The one point of attraction in the whole of his present course of action was the tie gradually formed by it between himself and Hester. He wrote to her frequently, and looked forward to another half-stolen interview with her upon his return. Three or four times, also, **she wrote to him.**

CHAPTER XXV.

A HOPELESS QUEST.

THE quest made by Robert Waldron was, as he expected, utterly fruitless, so far as its immediate object was concerned. He could discover no satisfactory trace of Rose, though he staid in Normandy several weeks longer than he had at first intended, urged by Hester to make sure that he left no means untried. At last he returned to England, without announcing his intention of doing so to her, and at once paid a visit to the garret of Madame Lawson. After his purposeless and impulsive nature, he resolved to see and know more of Hester, without looking forward to any result from such an intercourse, except the agreeable distraction from ennui which it afforded him.

Madame Lawson understood him better than he understood himself; and all her inherent love of intrigue, which had been starving for lack of food in England, revived in full force. She knew very well that a Monsieur, so distinguished and so handsome, did not pay his visits to her garret out of pure kindness to an exile. By dextrous questions she ascertained his position and his wealth. He even confided to her the history of his early fault, which seemed to her so venial that she exclaimed at these strange English, who could recollect so small a sin. She could see no reason whatever why this rich and great milord should not eventually love and be loved by Hester.

In fact, it was a beautiful little turn of the wheel by which the wrong which had been committed might be redressed. She very willingly let him know when he might find Hester at her place.

Robert took care to be there the very first time Hester paid Madame a visit after his return. But she was not a second time to be taken by surprise. She greeted him calmly and collectedly, and listened to his account of his journeyings with a grave and downcast face, while he spoke to her almost in a whisper, lest any word should reach other ears than her own. When his narrative was ended, and she looked more sad than before, Robert Waldron could no longer keep back a question which had been all the time upon his mind.

"What could you do, Hester?" he asked; "you could not see her for yourself."

"Not see her!" echoed Hester, with a sudden flame of passion upon her quiet face; "not see her! Why should I see you, and refuse to speak to her? Why should I let you touch my hand, and hold it back from her? I would go to her to-day, if I only knew where she was."

"You do not know what the world would say," said Robert Waldron.

"I believe I know what Christ would think," she murmured. The momentary fire of indignation and protest died out, and she leaned her face upon her hands, and wept long and bitterly, with tears of mingled disappointment and longing. It was the first time that the world's opinion had been, in any shape, thrust upon her. In her own dreams of fresh romance and enthusiastic religion, she had seen no obstacle whatever to her scheme for seeking out and rescuing her lost stepmother, whenever an opportunity should occur. And now this sudden check came

from *him* ! She wept so long and hopelessly that Robert Waldron was almost beside himself.

"Hetty," he said, "I will do whatever you bid me. I will go back again, and come here no more unless I find her, if you desire it. But there is no chance of discovering her. I assure you most solemnly I have done all I can ; yet I will go back again."

"No, no," she answered, "you must not leave your father a second time on a useless errand. But I have had nothing else to think of all these years, and now it is all over. I only wish we knew that she was dead !"

Robert Waldron echoed the wish ardently in his heart, but he did not utter it. Perhaps she might be dead ; but he had never attempted to establish that point. He resolved now to put this question afloat, and see what response he could get to it.

"I have thought of one other thing I can do," he said, "and it shall be done quickly. When may I see you again ?"

"I come here often," she answered, with wistful eagerness ; "this is the only place where I dare meet with you. My father must never know it."

Hester had been so long sole mistress and arbitress of her own actions that there was no element either of disobedience or concealment in the arrangement she had just suggested. It was merely to shield her father from the disquietude and pain of hearing Robert Waldron's name spoken in any connection, that she appointed Lawson's garret as the only place where she could meet him. To have asked her father's opinion would have seemed utter folly and cruelty to her. As she spoke, her girlish ignorance of the world smote upon Robert's conscience, but his generosity was not equal to the sacrifice. He must see her

again, why, he scarcely knew ; but to forego the stolen and prohibited delight was impossible to him.

"I will see you again in a few days," he said, in a measured voice which betrayed no emotion.

He staid no longer, but went away, leaving Madame to praise her new and powerful patron. The old Frenchwoman was wary, and perfectly comprehended the rôle she had to play. She would keep his secret, and aid his meeting with Hester to the utmost of her power. To this end she maintained a careful silence about Robert Waldron to her son, who never returned from the workshop until late in the evening, long after Hester had gone home, and when there was no chance of his visits.

John Morley, in his dark den, where he brooded over his long, sad, selfish dream of sorrow, had no idea that his daughter was in direct and personal communication with Robert Waldron. He was receiving some very material shocks to his profound inattention to business ; for his affairs were daily becoming more and more involved, and his creditors more pressing. In these troubles Hester had to bear more than her full share ; and whenever his thoughts turned from their old sorrow, they had nothing to occupy them but this new one. It was a relief to go and see the gay old woman, whose cheerful songs and laughter stirred her heart to something of girlish merriment ; and Robert Waldron's occasional presence there added another interest, amounting almost to an attraction, to her visits.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN IMPOSSIBILITY.

AT the close of the session Mr. Waldron bade farewell to his constituents, and resigned his seat in the House of Commons. It had been his wish that his son should take his place as the champion of Nonconformist interests ; but it was very well known that, as yet, Robert Waldron showed no proclivities towards Nonconformity ; and there was little chance of his being elected by the borough which had known and trusted his father so long. Mr. Waldron still retained his mental vigor, and was disinclined to fall into the inactivity of old age ; but his health was breaking, and he was too careful of his life to risk it any further by his conscientious attendance to his parliamentary duties. At home he had yet a post to fill as a landowner, a magistrate, and a member of the church at Little Aston, where he reigned with the absolute sway of a despot. He settled down as a country gentleman upon his estate at Aston Court, and found it, upon the whole, not unsuited to his taste. He had with him his two children. His son was the most affectionate, his daughter the most pious ; he hardly knew which occupied the first place in his heart. For Robert, it was now his great desire to find a wife who would make a home for him, and secure himself from the dread of his son taking flight once more. The yearning of an old man to see his children's children playing about his knees took hold of

him. But it was a question whether a husband of sufficiently eminent piety could be discovered for Miss Waldron, who was already approaching a doubtful age, and had not yet seen any one who was, in all respects, worthy of a Miss Waldron. In furtherance of his own growing desire, Mr. Waldron urged Robert to think seriously of marriage ; but when he replied by a request that his father would name the lady whom he would most willingly receive as his daughter-in-law, with a promise that he would then consider the matter, Mr. Waldron was at a loss. He ran over in his mind all the marriageable ladies in the neighborhood, and found none that quite accorded with his own views.

"You ought to choose for yourself, Robert," he said, with a little ill-humor.

"I have no choice," answered his son, meekly.

"Robert," he exclaimed the next Sunday night, after his return from the chapel, where he had refreshed himself during the singing of the hymns with regarding Hester's sweet, devout face ; "Robert, if the thing were not utterly impossible, I would rather have Hester Morley for my daughter-in-law, than any other woman in the world."

Mr. Waldron deceived himself. It was this very impossibility which made it possible for him to think of the bookseller's daughter as his son's wife. A good deal of the natural pride of rank was subdued in him, but it was not altogether cast out. Robert Waldron's ears tingled at the sound of this name uttered in such a connection ; but he made no reply. It was, of course, a secret to his father that he had ever seen Hester for himself.

"She is exactly the creature that would have suited you," pursued Mr. Waldron,—*"lovely, refined, and modest ; pious, too, for she is soon to become a member of the*

church. You are satisfied with Hester Morley's state of mind ; are you not, my dear ? ”

“ Not altogether,” replied Miss Waldron ; “ she is not open enough for me. I sometimes fear lest the root of the matter is not in her. But why are you talking about Hester Morley to Robert ? ” Miss Waldron had but just entered the room, and her father shrank from communicating to her his first frank and inconsiderate utterance.

“ I was merely alluding to her,” he answered evasively.

But, after this night, Mr. Waldron's mind often reverted to Hester. He looked into his own heart, and found that he had never given to any being, out of his own family, the love he felt for her. As for Robert, he set before himself the impossibility, the insurmountable obstacle, and gazed at it, and pondered over it, till it grew slowly less impossible and less insurmountable. He resolved to conquer it. The impenetrable barrier which lay between them should be removed. The deadly hatred of John Morley,—and he had every reason to believe his hatred to be deadly,—must be overcome. Hester's own heart, still free, and given neither to Grant nor himself, had to be won. It seemed, on the whole, as if he had very much in his favor,—wealth, rank, good looks, refinement, and cultivation. He would set them all against the accusing memory that rose against him. By lifting Hester so far above her station, the wrong would be, in part, balanced which had dragged down Rose into depths far below hers.

The idea of the honor proposed for her never dawned upon Hester. Her interviews with Robert Waldron were not clandestine to her, as they would have been to any other girl. There was no one to inquire where she went or whom she saw ; no one to whom she was in any way bound to give an account of her actions. She would

almost rather have died than have mentioned Robert Waldron's name to her father. But, for herself, she did not shrink from seeing him and conversing with him. There was an old childish tenderness lurking still in her heart, which wrapped about him and Rose, as about two beings who had made the brightest interval of her young life. Her knowledge of their sin was vague; and a thickly-woven veil of forgiveness wrought through the long years was thrown over it by her. But the very purity and intensity of her forgiveness protected her. She had never thought of love; and the thought did not awaken at any touch of Robert Waldron's.

It seemed as if Hester was just now brought into more close and frequent contact with the Waldrons. Miss Waldron organized anew her meetings for the female members of the church, and quite naturally Hester became a regular attendant at them. She was then constantly associating with her former teacher and patroness; and though Miss Waldron was not a whit less patronizing than when she was a child, she had grown up to it and thought of it only as "Miss Waldron's way." As to Mr. Waldron, she saw him often at chapel, and he always smiled upon her with a look of admiration, amounting to affection, as she accompanied her grey-bearded father along the chapel aisle. "If it had only been possible," he thought each time, "how gladly I would have welcomed her as my son's wife."

Though Mr. Waldron was now a great man, he could look back upon his early days when he had been used to visit his grandfather, the tenant of a small and poor farm, holding a position not much higher than an agricultural laborer. He was not a man to ignore or despise his own lowly origin, though his daughter did both; while Robert was so well content with his present position as to be

indifferent to that which had been his grandfather's and great-grandfather's. Certainly, Mr. Waldron had desired him to marry into a good family ; but if that could not be, there was nothing in the circumstances of Hester's father, as far as regarded his birth and character, which would render her an unsuitable wife for his son. Two generations back it would have been John Morley who would have been visited with scruples as to the fitness of such a marriage.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CASTLES IN THE AIR.

NOW that Mr. Waldron had no other interests to engage him, he had leisure to give his whole attention to the affairs of the church ; and he soon came to the conclusion that the great age and growing infirmities of its old pastor demanded some efficient assistance in the performance of his duties. Since John Morley had withdrawn from all active participation in church matters, the whole power and influence had fallen naturally into the hands of Mr. Waldron, who ruled without a voice being raised against him, or even a whispered murmur among his brethren, who looked up to him from afar off as to one who had an unquestionable authority. When, therefore, he proposed, in a church-meeting assembled especially for the purpose, that a colleague should be elected for Mr. Watson, adding, in a business-like manner, that he would pay him a salary from his own pocket, and not trouble the church with that charge, the proposition was carried unanimously, and with applause ; and the choice of the co-pastor was entrusted solely to him. Not solely to Mr. Waldron, however. It was an all-important charge, and Miss Waldron felt that the chief responsibility rested upon her devoted shoulders, which bore some cross perpetually. In fact the church at Little Aston was governed by her through her father, though perhaps unconsciously so to him. She made the choice of a colleague a subject of

prayer in all her meetings, and of very anxious thought in her own closet, which was a handsome and luxuriously furnished dressing-room, where she could meditate for hours without risk of intrusion. It would not do to have a married minister, who might be under the legitimate domination of a wife ; yet a young pastor was a somewhat dangerous creature to let loose in her fold of lambs. She balanced the disadvantages of both states with the most profound solicitude, but at length decided in favor of a young minister, who should be entirely free from female influence ; the more so as she did not shrink from the necessity of keeping a more vigilant oversight of her own part of the flock. This decision was communicated to her father, but represented under quite a different phase ; and Mr. Waldron agreed with her, that they might do some untried but devoted young man an untold good, by introducing him into the ministry under their patronage.

Not many days afterwards, Mr. and Miss Waldron found themselves at the entrance of a college, where the young ministers of their denomination were in training for the future discharge of the duties belonging to their office. It was a large, modern building in the suburbs of a busy manufacturing town, the distant hum of which blended with the quiet of a place of study. Of course it possessed none of the venerable associations of ancient colleges ; but there was a sober air of respectability and steady work about it, not altogether unlike the factories of the neighboring town. Miss Waldron appeared to be in her proper element—to breathe her native air. No romance clustered about the place, but there was the clear fact of seventy or eighty students wrestling from morning till night, and possibly from night till morning again, with those knotty problems of doctrine which exercised her own spirit. An atmosphere of controversy was wafted

through the long corridors, into which study-doors opened on each side in regular ranks. A murmur of theological discussion, perceptible only to fine ears, breathed in the quiet air. Again Miss Waldron felt that, by having been born a woman, she had missed her avocation. Here was her true home, and the pulpit was her sphere.

The president of the college, the Rev. James Harvey, D. D., received the ex-member of parliament and his daughter, with a mingled deference and dignity due to their position and his own. They were old acquaintances, and could dispense with some of the formalities of strangers ; so that Mr. Waldron quickly opened to him the mission he had come upon, in behalf of the church at Little Aston.

"I do not promise that it shall be a very great thing for a young man," he said. "I shall ask no assistance from the church. I do not think of offering a salary of more than a hundred a year, until I see how he suits me. But it will be an opening, and most probably would be the stepping-stone to another and wealthier church. A young minister, with my influence, might obtain a good charge in a year or two."

"No doubt, no doubt, Mr. Waldron," replied Dr. Harvey.

"We require," said Miss Waldron, thinking it was time for her to speak, "a young man of eminent piety, who will have no thought except for souls. He must be an interesting preacher, with a pleasant voice and choice language, but above all, sound in doctrine. We want no German neology among us. We should like one, too, who could make himself a pleasing companion to my poor brother, who is still in the bondage of sin—one who would exert a wholesome influence over him ; and as Robert is exceedingly fastidious, it is essential that he should

be a gentleman, Dr. Harvey. It is still more important that he should not be self-willed and opinionative ; though he must not be weak minded, or he will soon fall into the usual follies of a young pastor. He must be one who will look to us for guidance and companionship ; and who could visit at Aston Court upon suitable terms."

The last sentence was a little vague, and a young pastor might reasonably have demanded a definition of the words "suitable terms." But Doctor Harvey bowed low to Miss Waldron, and remarked, that it would be a singular advantage to any young man. He mused for some minutes, with his pen upon his lips, as if he were passing his seventy students in review before his mind's eye. His aspect remained grave and calculating ; but presently it brightened, and he nodded his head assentingly to his own thoughts.

"I have two of our young men in my eye at this moment," he said, "either of whom might do well for you, if you could assure them leisure to complete their course of study at Little Aston."

"Certainly," replied Miss Waldron ; "we have a complete library, which shall be at their disposal ; and I should myself take great interest in their studies."

"There is David Scott," pursued Dr. Harvey, "a fine logical and analytical mind, with the true ring of Calvin in it ; pure gold, sir, but a little unrefined as yet. And there is Carl Bramwell. You recollect Charles Bramwell, our minister at Park Lane Chapel, and his father, old John Bramwell ? They are the father and grandfather of this young man. A good lineage, and a young fellow of great promise, but a little too much inclined to be speculative, if he has a fault. It would be the making of either of them to be under your eye for a year or two. We will go

and visit them both in their studies, if you do not mind the trouble."

Neither of them minded the trouble, and they rose to accompany the Doctor with alacrity. The profound tranquillity of the place, and the associations connected with it, brought an unusual thrill of excitement to Miss Waldron. She trod with a quicker step, and spoke in a lower key, as they passed by, one after another, the closed doors. At length Doctor Harvey paused at one, and turning to her, said, "David Scott," as he knocked a sounding knock upon the panel, and waited for a moment to hear the words "come in."

"He is a trifle deaf," said the doctor, "but a fine fellow."

Miss Waldron felt a chill, which was not removed by the appearance of the student, a gaunt, awkward, ill-dressed lad from Scotland, who stared at her with embarrassment, and was hardly able to respond coherently to the observations made to him by Doctor Harvey. Their visit lasted but a few minutes; and Miss Waldron left the study with a painful sense of discouragement.

"I am sure he will not do for us at all," she said, plaintively.

"You ought to have seen him first in the pulpit," replied Doctor Harvey; "he is quite another being there, and handles his subject like a master. He will make a mark in the world by-and-by, I can assure you. But this is Carl Bramwell's room."

The doctor knocked lightly, but received no answer. There was an unbroken silence within the study. Miss Waldron's spirits sank yet lower; she felt doomed to disappointment.

"Bramwell must be absent," said the doctor; "but we will just look in, and see his books."

The young student was absent, but only in the sense of being absent in mind. He was seated on the low, broad window-sill, so absorbed in the study of a book which rested upon his knees, that he had neither heard the knock, nor the opening of the door. Miss Waldron had time to give him a lightning glance of criticism, and her heart leaped with joy, which sent the warm blood to her face. His features were of those which come from a long line of thoughtful and educated men: the fine, thin, spiritual face of a born scholar, scarcely concealing the ardor with which his mind was now busily at work over some favorite study. He was young, certainly not more than four-and-twenty, and his figure was slight and delicate. Just now the sun shone aslant upon his head, and displayed a profile of perfect regularity, with the lips upon the point of parting with a smile of keen intellectual delight. Miss Waldron had found the goodly pearl she had been seeking.

"Mr. Bramwell," said the doctor, laying his hand upon the shoulder of the student, who started from his abstraction with a fine glow upon his face, "I knocked, and as you gave no answer I thought your room was vacant, and I took the liberty of introducing some friends to it, as the best in the college. Miss Waldron and Mr. Waldron."

The well-known name carried no awe with it to the spirit of the young man, but he saluted the patron of the college and his daughter with an air of well-bred respect and welcome. He stepped aside for them to admire the view from his window; and when either of them addressed him, he answered freely but modestly.

"My time here is nearly finished," he said, in answer to a question of Miss Waldron's. "I shall have been in college three years, and shall have completed my course of study, so far. It has been a happy time to me."

"Have you any church in prospect?" she inquired, with a palpitating heart.

"Not yet," he answered, smiling, "but I am not anxious about it. The doctor has promised to interest himself for me when my time is up."

"Would you be willing to give up the four or five months still belonging to you, and take a charge at once?" inquired Doctor Harvey; and Miss Waldron felt strangely disquieted as the student hesitated before replying.

"I would rather not," he said, "but I would be governed by your advice. My examination in the London University will come off in six months or so, but I am pretty well prepared for it already. If you bade me go, Doctor, I would go."

"Would you object to a small country church?" asked Miss Waldron, more anxious than ever to secure him.

"Not at all," he said, "especially for my first charge."

"Nor to a co-pastorate?" inquired Mr. Waldron.

"My colleague and I would both have to prove whether we suited one another," he answered.

"Have you any mother or sister, who would wish to live with you?" asked Miss Waldron, afraid that she should not secure him free from female influence.

"I have one only sister," answered Carl, smiling again, "and she is about to be married soon to a young surgeon of the name of Grant, who is settled at Little Aston, near your residence."

"We know him well," she replied, graciously. "So your sister is going to be married to Mr. Grant. Father, I am sure we may open our proposal to Mr. Bramwell. His sister's residence at Little Aston would be an inducement to him to come to us."

Carl's face kindled and flushed as he instinctively

caught at the meaning of Miss Waldron's words. To live for some years near to his sister and his friend, appeared the height of human happiness to him, who had so often vainly longed for a home and domestic pleasures. With a small and pure church, into which no maxims or principles of the world could find an entry ; with a pleasant home in his sister's house, and the companionship of the two relatives dearest to him upon earth—he could have no desire of his heart ungratified. He heard Mr. Waldron and Doctor Harvey discoursing, but he hardly understood them. All he was sure of at the close of the interview was that a co-pastorate at Little Aston had been offered to him, and that his almost monastic study had been visited by a being who had looked at him with a gracious and pleasant smile, and spoken to him in a voice set to a softer key than the rough, masculine tones of his fellow-students.

Carl Bramwell would have given his answer at once, but his cautious seniors insisted upon his taking a week to consider it. He received two letters of ecstasy from Grant and his sister. Their marriage was to take place in a few weeks, after which he was to have his home with them. Until that event he was invited to stay at Aston Court itself, to be introduced under Mr. Waldron's auspices to the church, and to be initiated by him and Miss Waldron in the onerous duties of a pastor.

It had occurred to Mr. Waldron, in connection with their choice of this young student, that nowhere could be found a more suitable match for his little favorite, Hester. The red-haired Scotchman he had rejected in his own mind the moment he saw him ; but Carl Bramwell was certainly born for Hester, and she for him. He pleased himself with building a few castles in the air, for even elderly men will be guilty of this folly at times, and when Carl came, he received him with an effusion of welcome.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A FIRST CHARGE.

CARL BRAMWELL quitted his calm student-life with a natural feeling of regret, but also with a glow of enthusiasm at the first view of the wide stream of human interests, with its restless tides, which was about to bear him he knew not whither. He went through all the usual emotions and sensations of one who is bidding adieu finally to the tranquillity of boyhood and study ; but on the other hand he felt very intensely the fact that life was beginning for him in earnest, and he held his head erect with a new sense of dignity and responsibility. He was about to take upon his own soul the care of other souls. An unutterable and solemn tenderness filled his heart as he thought of these human spirits, frail, wavering between evil and good, tempted, sad, palpitating with the first germs of immortality planted in the midst of many thorns. He prepared his heart beforehand for the love, half that of a mother, which a true pastor should feel for his church. How he would study his people ! how he would watch over them ! how quietly he would root up the choking thorns, and let the free air and sunshine play about the young buds of divine grace ! This life, with its long hot days and weary weeks of labor, would be a hundredfold more worthy of a man than the serene egotism of a study.

There were other considerations which Carl's chival-

rous ardor disdained to take account of. In the college he had been only one of seventy, each of whom had an equal claim to the attention bestowed upon them. He had had but the seventieth share of a pulpit. He had lived in a mass ; been spoken to, looked at, fed, and generally cared for, as only an item in a large sum total. Now he was about to become the chief person in a circle, which, however small and contracted, would invest every word and action of his with importance and meaning. In a small church the pastor is even more an individual set apart than in the churches of great towns. Every one of his scanty congregation would have a lively and minute interest in him personally.

Of this future church of his, Carl knew two persons exceedingly well by report, and had for some months taken an almost extravagant concern in them. Grant had written often about John Morley and Hester, and Carl's interest had been keenly excited. Now that he was on the point of being brought into so intimate a relationship with them, he read over again the letters which had put him into possession of so much of their history ; he found himself about to enter upon the stage of one of those romantic incidents which now and then are acted before us on our journey through life.

He met with a very cordial welcome at Aston Court, and was more impressed and affected than he was himself aware of by the suddenness of the change from the bareness and inelegance of his college to the wealthy luxury of Mr. Waldron's mansion. All about him suited his somewhat delicate temperament, and chimed in with a somewhat hereditary refinement of taste. Robert Waldron seemed to him a finished gentleman ; and even Miss Waldron, to a young man who had known nothing of female society during many years, appeared pleasing and

graceful. She had considerably modified her early rigor on the subject of dress, and assumed her dingy brown costume and unbecoming bonnet only when engaged in religious services. At home, and especially during the present epoch, she chose pretty colors and soft materials ; and even condescended to employ a number of worldly artifices for disguising the ravages of time.

Yet towards Carl she adopted the tone of an elder sister, assuming a few years of seniority ; in some degree the most flattering and most beguiling manner of administering to a young man's self-love. He was very soon persuaded that Miss Waldron was one of the most charming, as well as the most saintly, women of her times ; only a grade or two below the perfection she sought to attain to. For she had confided to him, also, that the sole object of her life was her own sanctification, and the welfare of her perishing fellow-creatures.

Robert Waldron was uneasy about this new *protégé* of his sister's, with a sharp jealousy of his ten years' juniority, and the freshness of his manhood, which still wore the glory and brightness of a morning without clouds. The first moment in which his eye fell upon the clear-cut features, and the scholarly refinement of the young pastor's face, and his ears heard the pleasant and pure utterance of his voice, he had instinctively, and with a tremor of dismay, pictured to himself Hester sitting in her seat at chapel, with her sweet, pale face, and her grey eyes, with the soul shining through them, lifted up in wrapt attention to the preacher's words. He hoped ardently that he was a fool, and he tested him. But Carl was no fool ; his mind was vigorous and cultivated, and his tact wonderful for a mere student. It was true that upon many points he was ignorant of the world's customs and usages ; but his very ignorance was a charm ; it was the pure innocence

of a soul which had never looked into the muddy depths of worldly ways. Robert could not help but like him ; yet he would gladly have sacrificed half his fortune to prevent Carl Bramwell becoming the co-pastor of the insignificant church at Little Aston. But fate and Miss Waldron were too strong for him.

It was well for Robert's peace of mind that he did not happen to be present at a short conversation which had taken place a morning or two after Carl's arrival. The appointed time for introducing him to his future charge at a church-meeting was drawing near ; but until then, Miss Waldron had guarded her new acquisition from the intrusion of any unseasonable visitor. This evening he was to be received as co-partner with Mr. Watson in the presence of the assembled church ; but early in the day a messenger arrived to say that the old minister was seized with an alarming access of his illness, and could not by any possibility leave his own chamber.

"The meeting must proceed as arranged," said Miss Waldron, decisively. "There will be the more necessity for it, as Mr. Bramwell must at once take upon himself the duties of the pastorate."

"And Hester Morley was to have been received into the church," observed Mr. Waldron.

"So she was !" exclaimed Miss Waldron, with a pause of deliberation ; "what is to be done now, father ?"

Carl had heard this name spoken for the first time with a quickened pulse and more attentive ear ; but he waited a moment or two for Mr. Waldron's answer, which did not come.

"Who is Hester Morley ?" he asked, with a slight hesitation in his manner, which escaped Miss Waldron's not very keen observation. It needed a very obvious emotion to be manifest to her rather dull sensibility.

"She is a young girl in my Bible-class," she replied, with an air of humility, "over whom I have watched most anxiously. She is little more than a child, and worse than motherless. But that is a painful topic to us all. Mr. Waldron was to have given her the right hand of fellowship to-night, as next Sabbath is the ordinance."

"But cannot Mr. Bramwell receive her into the church?" suggested Mr. Waldron.

"I think not," she said, hastily. "Hester is very much attached to Mr. Watson, and he to her. It would be unkind to him. No, no. That will not do."

"I will see Mr. Watson and Hester in the course of the day," said Mr. Waldron.

"No, no," she urged, in a peremptory tone; "it would divide the interest, and confuse Mr. Bramwell's thoughts, which should be centred on his own solemn obligations. Hester must wait."

"I have heard something of her and of her father from Grant," said Carl, still speaking shyly, and glancing about him to see if Robert was anywhere within hearing. "They must be among the most interesting people in our church."

"Well, I don't know," said Miss Waldron, rather sharply. "I think John Morley no more a Christian than any benighted heathen in foreign lands; indeed, in my opinion, he is worse. Hester is a white-faced, thin, overgrown girl, with very little to say for herself. We do not see very much of either of them; for, of course, they are in quite a different position from ours, and now that Hester is no longer a child, I do not know that it would be well for her to visit here. I dare say you will see John Morley to-night, and if you can bring him to any better state of mind, I shall rejoice greatly. You shall have my prayers in this, as in all your other important duties."

She looked up into his face with a smile of sympathy and sisterly interest ; and the young man felt penetrated with a sense of gratitude to her. But it could not altogether blot out the thought of John Morley and his daughter, and the wonder whether Hester would not be admitted into the church that evening. As Miss Waldron had predicted, the mention of it only confused Mr. Bramwell's mind, which would otherwise have been centred upon his own solemn obligations. He remembered how Grant had once said of John Morley, "He would perhaps show his heart to you, Carl ; but you will never come across him." Yet he was now about to enter upon a definite relationship with this very man, which would give him almost a right to seek his confidence. As for Hester, he felt a little disappointed at the portrait Miss Waldron had sketched of her, and he could not help smiling at the different colors in which Grant had painted it. No doubt Miss Waldron was more correct than Grant. She had seen Hester grow up under her eyes, and had known her face well. It provoked him greatly that amid all the solemn thoughts of this epoch in his life, a shade of vexation should come across him as often as the idea of Hester intruded itself upon his busy brain.

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CHAPTER XXIX.

IN SUCCESSION.

THE church at Little Aston was by no means Carl Bramwell's ideal church. With the exception of the Waldrons and Morleys, it consisted almost exclusively of very ordinary and vulgar persons, of little education and not over-enlightened religion. Their number was not so large as that of his fellow-students, every one of whose faces he could read as he preached to them. But these people looking at him were his souls. Their eyes were the open windows of spirits who were to be led by him. A fine film of tears threw a hazy glory over them. He saw nothing of the smallness and commonness and vulgarity of this very common church, some of whom "served God," as Carlyle says, "by laboriously selling a red herring." Carl's blue eyes grew dim as he sat at Mr. Waldron's right hand in a square pew under the pulpit ; and he felt what an awful thing it is to take the care of souls.

He was so wrapt in this enthusiasm, that he neither heard Mr. Waldron speak, nor the congregation rise to their feet, until a voice close beside him, a voice soft and sweet and clear, suddenly rang through his trance and startled him as with an electric shock. It was nothing more than a voice starting the tune for the hymn about to be sung, but Carl turned his head quickly to the spot whence it sounded. He could not be mistaken as to who were the white-haired and sorrow-stricken man, and the

young girl standing closely at his side ; and his own face flushed and burned with an uncontrollable emotion as he caught the glance of both their eyes. It was a hymn of welcome, and he could have wept, but for very shamefacedness, as he listened to it.

His eyes were still dazzled, and his heart beating painfully, when, after Mr. Waldron had said what he had to say in introducing him to his church, he was obliged to stand up alone and face his people, to give utterance to some of the feelings of his heart towards them. He was speaking with a simple eloquence and earnestness, when the vestry-door near to him was opened softly, and his friend Grant stepped to Mr. Waldron's side, and whispered something in his ear. Carl paused, and Mr. Waldron addressed the meeting in a hurried and trembling voice.

"Brethren," he said, "our dear old pastor, who has been very ill, as you all know, is now on the point of death, and he desires to see his young colleague immediately, with brother Morley and myself. The necessity is urgent, and we must leave you at once. Let some among you engage in prayer.

A dead silence prevailed while Carl, with Mr. Waldron and John Morley, quitted the lighted chapel and plunged into the darkness of the streets. To Carl it seemed more like one of the many dreams of his student-life than the sober reality that it was. His ecstasy of emotion was not yet over ; the voices which had welcomed him were still ringing in his ears. Yet he was here in the unlit street, following in silence as Mr. Waldron walked before him, and with a second companion known only to him by his melancholy history. He was going, too, to witness the death of an old man, his co-pastor, whom he had never seen. It could be only a dream. If there were anything real in this night's experience, it was that his ears had

heard a voice which would make his heart restless till he could hear it again.

They soon reached the minister's little house, and saw one window brightly illuminated by the light which the dulled eyes of the dying often need as they go down into the valley of darkness. Carl shook off the enthrallment and bewilderment of his fancies, and roused himself to realize the scene he was about to witness. Mr. Waldron knocked gently at the door, and it was opened in an instant by a woman who awaited their arrival. A line of light fell down the little garden they crossed ; and for the first time Carl became aware that Grant was following them, and with him a slight girlish figure whose face was veiled.

He had not time to see more, for Mr. Waldron and John Morley had gone on, and were already ascending the staircase. The chamber into which they entered was barely and scantily furnished, except with books, for it had evidently been the study of the dying man, as well as his bedroom. Their footsteps sounded loudly as they trode across the bare and creaking boards. The curtains of faded chintz were drawn back from the bed, and the old minister's palsied head, propped up with pillows, was turned anxiously towards them. He fastened his glazing eyes upon Carl ; and the two other men also turned their gaze instinctively upon him. Mr Waldron, in his hale and hearty old age, which as yet was only grey with the coming shadow ; and John Morley with his air of a century of suffering, which caused him to equal the dying man in his burden of years. These three old men faced him, and looked upon his youth with profound interest. Again he felt himself in a dream, and the silence grew intolerable to him. It was broken by the old pastor

stretching out his withered and shaking hand to him, and breathing the word, "Brother."

The single word spoken in the thin and labored voice of death, possessed a peculiar pathos, linking as it did the old man who was putting off his mortality, with his young successor rich in vigorous life. An eternal brotherhood linked all men together in an unbroken chain with the Divine Elder Brother, of whom they were both ambassadors. Carl's eyes grew clear, and shone with the kindling of a chivalrous enthusiasm upon the three aged men who confronted him.

"Yes," he said, grasping the chilly and wrinkled hand of the dying man in his own, "I am your brother ; and I am ready to take up your work when you lay it down. What is it you will have me do ? I have many years to live and work in yet."

"There is Hester standing behind you," answered Mr. Watson.

She had glided in with her noiseless step, and stood near to him, waiting to approach more closely the old minister. Mr. Waldron's features brightened for an instant, and Mr. Watson raised his head eagerly.

"Come near to me, Hester," he said. "There is nothing that you may not hear. Wait a moment, all of you ; I have something to say to you."

He lay still for a few minutes, collecting his thoughts ; and Carl looked round the bare room, whose emptiness and bareness made more chilly the atmosphere of death. Was this to be the end of the career upon which he had entered this evening ? He did not dare to turn his eyes to the place where Hester sat, beside the pillow of her old friend ; but he saw her, vaguely and indistinctly, bending over him and wiping the damp cold forehead with her handkerchief. There had been a thought of his own

death all day in Carl's mind, as there is in every time of unusual agitation to a sensitive and visionary spirit ; but it had not been a solitary and almost friendless death like this.

"I must speak," said the minister in a sad, and well-nigh querulous voice ; "I have had very much to bear upon my soul because of my church. It has been a heavy charge ; and there is a great deal to be done yet before it will be without spot or blemish. The task has been too hard for me. I pray God you may be stronger for His service than I have been."

"God looks upon your work with other eyes than yours," said Carl. "You will hear Him say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant : enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.'"

The dim eyes brightened a little as Carl's voice repeated the familiar words ; but he shook his already trembling head despondingly.

"Nay, but I have not been faithful," he answered ; "I have been afraid to speak, and kept silence often and often against my conscience. Brethren, bear with me this once. I am more afraid of God than of you at this moment. Your divisions and your want of brotherly love have been a heavy burden upon me. Brother Waldron, there has been a canker-worm of worldly pride and self-will in your heart, which must needs be cast away. You have made us all feel it,—the Church and me. You were too great a man for us ; there was no one to stand against you ; and I never dared to say it till now."

His voice fell into almost inarticulate whispers, and he paused for more strength. Perhaps never did a deacon feel more completely confounded and thunderstruck beside his pastor's death-bed than did Mr. Waldron ; but it was not a time for him to protest against his judgment.

"As for you, dear brother Morley," continued the painful voice, "you have been a continual sorrow and heaviness of heart to me. Look at what you are doing. You are throwing away your life, which ought to have been a blessing to all about you. You have made Hester's life a grief to her."

"It is not I who have done it," replied John Morley, with a quivering face.

"Nay, but it is you," he urged; "surely the past should be forgotten. I am very sorrowful for Hester; she has had a sore burden to carry also. Will you not take it from her? Now you are all here, I commend her to you; for in me she will lose a friend, and she cannot afford to lose any. She has been like a very dear daughter unto me. You will all take care of Hester."

He did not seem to expect any answer, but turned to Hester and smiled feebly upon her. A moment or two afterwards he resumed his speech.

"My child," he said, "I was to have received you into my church to-day. Surely I may do it now in the presence of these witnesses. Hester, I give you the right hand of fellowship, in token that you are received into the Church of Christ."

He laid his right hand in hers, and closed his weary eyelids, sinking back, as if exhausted, upon his pillow. Grant, who had stolen unperceived to the other side of the bed, placed his fingers upon his pulse, and made a sign to them to take Hester away. Carl bent down and put his mouth near to the ear of his dying colleague.

"I will stay with you till the end," he said.

"Ay, stay," he whispered; "I have need of you. I am afraid, still."

It was a long night, and Carl passed it in scarcely interrupted reverie as he watched the last ebb of life reced-

ing slowly from the heart of this stranger to whom he found himself united by so strong a tie. It was a night full of checks and chills upon his young enthusiasm. The charge, even of this humble church, had been too burdensome for its pastor. Towards the end he spoke often and incoherently of Hester, and was troubled for her, repeatedly recommending her to Grant and Carl. Then his voice sank into whispered murmurings, and breathed its last word in a tone which no ear could catch. Carl had become the sole pastor of the Church at Little Aston.

CHAPTER XXX.

MISS WALDRON'S COUNSEL.

BREAKFAST was just finished, but the family had not yet dispersed, when Carl reached Aston Court next morning. There was a shade of embarrassment in Mr. Waldron's greeting, for he could not forget that this young man, who was under his patronage, had heard administered to him the sharpest rebuke it had ever been his lot to receive. Yet at bottom he was too true a man and too sincere a Christian to resent his dying pastor's reproach. He shook Carl's hand, therefore, with more warmth than usual, and looked cordially into his worn face, which was weary with the watching and the meditations of the night. Robert, who had been about to quit the table, lingered to listen to his report ; with a secret impatience to hear what had occurred at the meeting the night before, and to ascertain whether Carl and Hester had yet seen one another. Miss Waldron was the first to inquire after the minister.

"He is dead," answered Carl, with the brevity of emotion.

"And what was the last utterance of our beloved pastor?" she asked. She had rather looked down upon the meek and timid old man during his lifetime ; but she possessed the common and morbid curiosity for knowing the last words of the dying.

"It was inarticulate," replied Carl evasively; "his voice failed him an hour or two before he died."

"But," persisted Miss Waldron, "there must have been some last sayings which were articulate before he lost his voice. The last words of dying saints are very precious, and they should be made the property of the Church."

"He was speaking chiefly of two of the members of his church," said Carl, with reluctance; "it was his dying charge to me as his successor. He committed to my care those for whom he felt the greatest anxiety."

"And who might these be?" asked Miss Waldron, "*two* members of the Church! We can be of use to you here. You know nothing of your flock as yet; but we know them. Whom did our dear pastor so specially commend to your charge?"

Carl looked round at each face with doubt and irresolution. If Miss Waldron had been alone he would not have hesitated to tell her all; but how could he mention John Morley and Hester before Robert? Mr. Waldron guessed the reason of his reluctance, and would not yield to avoiding the utterance of John Morley's name.

"I can tell you, I believe," he said, addressing his daughter, "it would be Hester and her father."

A rapid tremor of agitation ran through Robert Waldron's frame, and he rose hurriedly from his chair as if to leave them altogether; but he only walked to the window and stood looking out upon the terrace before it.

"But Hester is no member of the Church," said Miss Waldron, almost peevishly; "and I want to know how ever she came to be present at the church-meeting last night."

"I gave her permission to be present," replied Mr. Waldron, in a mild, deprecating tone; "and, my dear, Mr. Watson received her into the Church last night before

he died. It was no doubt informal ; but I was present, and so were Mr. Bramwell, and her father. There was something very affecting in it, I assure you."

The tears stood in Mr. Waldron's eyes at the recollection. Everything which concerned Hester touched the softest part of his nature ; and Miss Waldron would have been struck with utter amazement at her father's folly, if she could for a moment have seen into the close recesses of his heart.

"I never in all my life heard of such a thing," she exclaimed, pronouncing the words slowly, and with marked emphasis, "what could you all have been thinking of? Hester Morley at the death-bed of Mr. Watson! That girl is the most singular person I ever met with. I do not consider her fit for church-membership, as yet. She has the most independent notions, and no clear faith in one doctrine. Poor girl! She has grown up under great disadvantages."

She stopped abruptly, for it was impossible to enumerate Hester's disadvantages before her brother, who was chafing and fuming inwardly, but who did not care to leave the room, as long as Hester was the topic of the conversation.

"What disadvantages?" asked Carl absently ; speaking only because Miss Waldron paused.

She darted an apologetic and beseeching glance at Robert, who now turned round with a face dark with anger.

"Mr. Bramwell," he said, in a tone which startled Carl from his absence of mind, "I suppose it is your right to learn the domestic history of your people ; and I will leave you to hear that of the Morleys from my sister."

He walked out of the room without giving Carl time to answer ; and Miss Waldron threw herself back in the

chair, with her handkerchief to her eyes. Mr. Waldron, with an expression of shame and pain upon his face, was about to speak, when Carl interrupted him gently.

"I know it all," he said; "I knew it long before I had any thought of coming here. Grant wrote to me, and told me all he then knew, at the time he was attending Mr. Robert Waldron in Mr. Morley's house, about nine months ago."

Mr. Waldron regarded Carl with an air of profound astonishment, mingled with incredulity as to whether he had heard him aright; and Miss Waldron dropped her handkerchief, and turned a bewildered gaze upon him.

"Attending my son in John Morley's house!" ejaculated Mr. Waldron; "what did you say, Mr. Bramwell?"

"It cannot be a secret to you," answered Carl, taken by surprise, himself; "surely you knew it, Miss Waldron? Your brother was almost murdered at the door of Mr. Morley's house about nine months ago."

"Robert had an accident nine months ago," she said, "through which Mr. Grant nursed him; but it was at Beckbury, twenty miles from here."

"I have done wrong," cried Carl, with a look and tone of concern; "but it did not occur to me for an instant that you did not both know the facts. I knew that he wished the secret kept from the townspeople, which I very well understood. I beg of you not to betray my indiscretion to him. If you wish me to gain his esteem and friendship, it would only prejudice him against me."

He spoke with extreme earnestness, and addressed himself rather to Mr. Waldron than to his daughter. With her he felt sure that he was safe.

"But what is it?" asked Mr. Waldron, with impetuosity; "I must know the whole of it now. What did you say? Robert almost murdered at John Morley's door?"

"Grant can tell you all about it," said Carl; "but if he will not, I will read his letter again, or put it into your hands, on condition that you do not betray either of us to your son. If I could see any good to result from letting him know of it, I would make no condition at all; but I do not."

"I will go and question Grant this moment," exclaimed Mr. Waldron, hurrying away with more than ordinary energy, and leaving his daughter alone with Carl. There had been very much to excite and trouble her in the foregoing conversation; for Robert had already insinuated to her his own apprehensions relating to Carl and Hester. It had been done with caution and finesse, but there was a dread in the depths of her own heart with which it exactly coincided. It would be hard indeed if Carl were so soon to cease to belong exclusively to herself. He drew nearer to her, and appealed to her in a tone of earnest but deferential importunity.

"Mr. Watson committed Hester Morley to the care of Grant and myself," he said, "but what can we do for her? It is you, who are so good, and to whom the Master has entrusted so many talents, who should be the friend of this lonely girl. I do not know what calamity Mr. Watson feared for her, but there seemed some special dread about her future. What could I do to protect her from sorrow and danger? I will be indeed her friend, but you are wiser and better than me; a woman like herself, your heart has a purity and tenderness unknown to man. You will be her friend, even as you are already so generously and so nobly mine?"

He spoke with eloquent warmth, and approached her so closely that his hand nearly touched hers. There was a peculiar fascination about the mere presence of a young and pleasing woman, such as she appeared to him; and

this morning he felt more than usual the need of a woman's gentle ministry to chase away the gloomy impressions of the night.

"Ah!" sobbed Miss Waldron, with very real and very bitter tears, "I am so much your friend that I tremble for you; so impulsive and so inexperienced as you are. I am older than you, and have seen much, both in the Church and the world. I foresee that you may attain to great eminence and usefulness; but a single false step at the outset of your career may become your ruin. Be warned in time. I am frank with you because I feel a great regard for you. Leave the charge of poor Hester Morley to me, and do not take too great an interest yourself in her welfare. She is young and foolish, and might draw you into a difficulty it would be hard to escape from."

Miss Waldron succeeded in pronouncing these sentences in a tone penetrated with candor and a deep concern in him. The hot quick blood of his sensitive nature had mounted to his face, and a spark of almost angry resentment had kindled in his eyes; but he could not steel himself against her agitation and tears. There was subtle, delicious flattery in this warm interest of a woman, his elder and superior, which compensated for the gall of the admonition. When she raised her eyes to him, sparkling through her tears, they met a glance in his which made her heart glow with a sensation altogether new to her. Her eyelids dropped, and her lips trembled; but she mastered her emotion sufficiently to resume the conversation in a somewhat lighter tone.

"I speak for your sake," she said. "Hester has a certain amount of beauty which would make it excusable for a man young as you are to be attracted by it. But I know of no one so unsuitable to become a prominent

member of any Church, such as a minister's wife should be. Of course, some day you will fall in love and marry, but I trust not with Hester Morley. She is visionary and unsound in the faith ; she is not to be trusted. There is not the spirit of the daily cross in her. Though she is in the church, she belongs to the world. Her only friend is a frivolous Frenchwoman of the lower orders, a Papist ; and Hester herself owns that she makes no effort to convert her. She says that she is too old for change, and too dark to understand our pure and lofty creed. I shall insist, some day, upon bearing the bread of life to this famishing soul ; for Hester, who sees her frequently, does not feed her with a single crumb. You can judge how unfit she is for a post of honor in the vineyard. Therefore I warn you beforehand. 'As a jewel of gold in a swine's snout, so is a fair woman which is without discretion.'"

With this harsh quotation hurled at Hester, Miss Waldron concluded her admonition, and Carl remained silent. Seeing the impression she had produced, she recommended him, with an air of sisterly sweetness, to seek some repose before entering on the necessary preparations for the services of his first Sunday as pastor of the Church. Carl obeyed with alacrity, and shut himself up in his own room for the rest of the morning.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A PAINFUL DISCOVERY.

IN the meantime Mr. Waldron was hastening with all speed to find Grant, before he left his lodgings to make his morning call upon his patients, whose number was increasing with fair rapidity under the prestige of Mr. Waldron's patronage. He burst upon him just as he was preparing to go out, and lost no time in beating about the bush. As a statesman Mr. Waldron had known no tactics, except that of asking straightforward and pungent questions ; and he tried no other means now. Grant was as frank as himself ; and having a greater respect for him than for his son, and being rather glad at Carl's inadvertence, he soon put Mr. Waldron into possession of all the facts he knew.

"But what rancor there must be in John Morley's soul !" cried Mr. Waldron, sinking into a chair, and resting both his hands upon the arms of it. "I can barely credit it, Grant. Were you convinced then, both of you, that he, and nobody else, could have struck the blow !"

"Is there any other man who owes him such a grudge ?" asked Grant, bluntly.

"Oh, I don't know," he answered, in accents almost peevish, and with a gesture as if he would have nothing to do with it. "My son has wounded me to the very quick ; and I have ceased to seek out his faults. He will have to bear the consequences himself, here and hereafter."

His upright head sank a little on his breast ; and his eyes, bright and undimmed still, met Grant's regard ruthfully.

"You are too hard upon him," said Grant with an honest plainness which was as honey to Mr. Waldron. "I would stake my head that this is the only folly of which he has been guilty ; and he was little more than a boy when he fell into it. He was four years younger than I am ; and, dear me ! what I might have done if I'd been rich and idle, and an only son, like him !"

Mr. Waldron breathed more calmly, and the rigid muscles about his mouth relaxed into the expression which generally served him as a smile. But his mind recurred to John Morley.

"Yet how could you account for him taking you into his own house ?" he asked.

"He could do nothing else," answered Grant. "I walked into the nearest house with your son in my arms, and Hester had let me in before he knew anything of it. To screen himself he was obliged to let us remain. Neither of us believe that he had any previous design to attack him ; but seeing him sauntering about the street which he was forbidden to enter, John Morley was overcome by a sudden access of revenge and passion. A blow struck more warily must have killed him ; half an inch, ay, the tenth of an inch would have done it."

"But what weapon did he use ?" asked Mr. Waldron, shuddering.

"Some days afterwards," he replied, "I saw in his workshop several iron bars, from a foot and a half to four feet in length. They are used for screwing up the binding-presses. If one of these happened to be at hand it would form a very likely weapon."

"I am afraid it must be true," said Mr. Waldron.

"I am sure of it," replied Grant.

"But, how then?" he exclaimed, "you choose this man for your friend, you visit him daily, believing him all the while to be a murderer!"

"No more a murderer than you or I," said Grant, calmly. "I have studied John Morley; he is as soft-hearted as a woman, always apt to be overwhelmed by the sin and misery of the world. To him there must be a constant pressure of despair from the thought of the sin and misery of the wife he has loved and lost. If he knew for certain that she was dead, half his burden would fall off. When he saw your son, a frenzy seized him, and I do not wonder at the blow he struck. In many countries it would pass for a virtue rather than a crime."

"But he is a member of the church," said Mr. Waldron, "and attends the means of grace."

"Just now," answered Grant, "a long walk every day would be the best means of grace for him, and it would do him more good to be a member of the Alpine Club. The truth is, he is crusted over with morbid melancholy amounting to monomania. Why, I should commit a score of murders if I lived, as he does, in the eternal gloom of that house! So would you, Mr. Waldron."

"Hush! there he is," cried Mr. Waldron.

In a window nearly opposite them could be seen the head of John Morley set in the blackened and decayed frame of the casement. He stood motionless, looking upwards with blank eyes which evidently saw nothing. The deep lines in his face seemed more furrowed than ever and his whole aspect was one of grim and perpetual hopelessness. He glanced round once, and his eyes appeared to sweep the full range of their sight as if searching for some object which he had lost, but which he had long

since despaired of finding. Mr. Waldron watched him with painful and contending emotions.

“Grant,” he said, “I’d give him half my possessions if they would do him any good. Yet he almost killed my son, my only boy ! I feel nearer hating him than I ever felt towards any man. You do not know how a father feels ! Why, it was only last night I shook the hand that had been raised against my boy’s life ! I hope I am a Christian. God deliver me in His abundant grace from the devil ! But to think what it would have been if Robert had been murdered, and I had never heard him speak again. He was such a good boy once, Grant ; a good, affectionate, conscientious boy was my Robert. Bob I called him then. And that man yonder had nearly killed him ! I wish he would take half my fortune, and go away out of the country. But to-morrow I shall see him at chapel, and next week he will stand beside me at the grave of our old pastor. I had better go home and think it all over quietly by myself ; and may God give me grace to prove myself a true Christian.”

He wrung Grant’s hand convulsively, and took a last furtive glance at the grey, despairing face in the window opposite. Then he retraced his steps homewards, and, like Carl Bramwell, shut himself up in his room alone to think over the discovery of John Morley’s crime and Robert’s danger.

CHAPTER XXXII.

HESTER'S SANCTUARY.

MISS Waldron took care that Carl should have no opportunity of seeing Hester again until some of the excitement of his new position had worn off, and until she had established a stronger influence over him. It was astonishing how great an effect her clever platitudes had upon him. She possessed the art of investing commonplace observations with a seeming profundity which might easily have imposed upon an older man than Carl ; while at the same time she surrounded him with those thousand minute delicate attentions which lie only in the power of a woman. Once or twice she drove with him to John Morley's house, and waited in the carriage at the door while he made a pastoral call ; by which means she insured an extreme brevity of visit, and had the satisfaction of learning that Hester had not made her appearance.

How long she could have maintained this careful line of conduct is uncertain, if Grant had not been impatient to introduce Carl more familiarly to John Morley ; and he took the first chance that presented itself. Carl naturally chose to see a good deal of his future brother-in-law ; and though Grant was made welcome at Aston Court by all, even by Miss Waldron, who was fully awake to this weak point in her position, yet she could not forbid the young minister visiting him in his own rooms. A favorable op-

portunity occurred before long, when Grant invited him, without formality, to call upon John Morley.

"I want you, if possible, to infuse a little hope into his nature," said Grant; "and then, if I could induce him to shut up shop an hour earlier and take some healthy exercise instead of going to the prayer-meeting, we should make him a tenfold better Christian than he is. Don't you agree with me?"

"To be sure I do," answered Carl.

"Miss Waldron wouldn't," said Grant, laughing; "but it stands to sense that when a poor fellow's liver is as bad as a liver can be, he cannot be as good a Christian as he ought to be. I'll make you see that as plain as print, Carl, if you will only attend."

"Hadn't we better see Mr. Morley first?" suggested Carl.

"Well, I'm ready," he answered. "I don't need a hat just to cross the street. There a customer has gone in—a rare bird opposite—but if you like we will go and see Hester first. I am quite at home over yonder."

He proved the truth of his last words by entering the house without knocking at the door. The lobby had a damp earthy smell, at which he uttered a significant "Faugh!" He passed on without ceremony up the staircase to Hester's little sitting-room, the door of which was half open. It was the same homely, austere, bare room where Robert had passed his weary hours of convalescence. To Carl's student-eyes it was full of charms. The glitter of gilded bindings upon the bookshelves; the pile of snowy work upon the table where Hester had been sewing, with an open volume before her. A small thimble lay upon the page, so curious and rare a toy to Carl that he could not forbear to take it up and try it upon his own fingers, one after the other, until it fitted the least. He

wished that Miss Waldron would sometimes employ herself with sewing. The open book was one of his special favorites ; and several others upon the shelves were well worth his own reading. He put his hat down on the table near to Hester's work, and regarded the whole with a singularly pleased smile upon his lips. There were no more than two chairs in the room, Hester's and another. He took the other, and looked across to her seat beside the white work and the open book and the thimble lying upon the page. Miss Waldron's kind admonitions were all lost upon him.

He had been in the room, Hester's sanctuary, alone, for Grant had left him there while he went to seek her. Grant was not actually away more than a minute, for he had gone only to the end of the long passage, to the door which connected the workroom with the dwelling, and there shouted to Lawson, in his loud, sonorous voice, to ask if she was up in the attic. Hester's own clear tone had answered, inviting him to come up to her. He went back to fetch Carl.

"She says we are to go up to her," he announced.

"Who says?" asked Carl absently.

"Who says?" echoed Grant ; "good gracious, Carl, what a dreamy fellow you are ! Why, Hester says so, Hester Morley. I wonder at you. Come along with me."

Carl followed him, almost with a guilty conscience, a sense of treachery and disobedience to Miss Waldron. Yet was it not decidedly his duty to become acquainted with Hester ? He would set so strict a guard over himself that he would not fall into the danger his kind sisterly friend apprehended. He knew indistinctly that they were passing through some remarkably dingy rooms and up a narrow staircase ; and then they came to a flood of sunshine, and a glorified attic, with a young, lovely, gracefu

girl standing in the midst of the sunbeams, glowing and blushing with surprise, and looking into his face with shy, almost timid, grey eyes. It was time for Carl to shake off his absence of mind. It was perfectly necessary that he should conduct himself as a pastor. After uttering a few words, what he knew not, he looked round the curious apartment, and saw an undersized and withered-looking man standing behind Hester. When he met Carl's eyes he bowed profoundly, and with an ease that confounded the young scholar, who had made no study of any mode of salutation. It was a full minute before he could venture to glance at Hester again, but when he did so, she had turned back to the binding-press in the window where Grant was looking carefully at her work. Carl drew a step or two nearer to them.

"Mr. Bramwell," she said, "this is my own work. I have learned to gild the books after Lawson has bound them. This is Lawson, my father's bookbinder, and my oldest friend."

Carl shook hands cordially with Lawson.

"Mr. Grant ought not to have brought you up here the very first time," continued Hester, a little reassured. "I did not know you were with him, or I should have come down stairs to you."

"I am very glad you did not know," said Carl, with difficulty.

"I am not sure that I am altogether sorry," answered Hester, feeling a girlish sympathy with his evident embarrassment, and talking the more fluently because of it. "You know I have seen you several times already, though I have not spoken to you and I do not feel as if you were quite a stranger. Besides, Mr. Grant has talked to me a great deal about you and your sister. I know all about

her ; and I do hope she will like me very much when she comes to live at Little Aston.

Carl felt as if he should renounce his sister if she did not make Hester her chief friend—after Miss Waldron, perhaps.

“ I think,” said Hester, with a charming little toss of her head, “ it is quite as well you should know at once that I belong to the working classes. Yes, I work up here five or six hours a day, for poor Lawson’s hand is not always steady enough for it. I am not at all an idle, elegant young lady ; Mr. Grant will tell you that. He sits by the press sometimes for a whole hour watching me.”

What would not Carl give for such a privilege ? He caught himself wondering whether he should ever do the same, and reproved himself sharply for it.

“ Hester looks upon me as an old married man,” said Grant, with a laugh ; “ and I believe I am the only one she ever sees, except her father and Lawson.”

A flush crept slowly over Hester’s face until it deepened into a crimson hue of shame, so plain and so painful that both of them turned away on pretence of looking at the specimens of binding upon the walls.

“ She is as shy as a lapwing,” whispered Grant in Carl’s ear ; “ I ought not to have said it.”

“ We will go down stairs now,” said Hester, after a moment’s pause ; and she took off her large apron, and smoothed down the sleeves which had been rolled up above her round and dimpled elbows. “ My father will be very glad to see you, Mr. Bramwell. For the last three or four years Mr. Watson could not come often to see us, and my father receives no other visitors, except Mr. Grant.”

Carl followed her down stairs, wondering at his own

silence and the difficulty he felt in speaking to her. Relief came to him in John Morley's presence, for the melancholy and reserved man brightened at the appearance of him and Grant. The fire and beauty of their early manhood, its freshness and buoyancy, had still a nameless charm for him in the midst of his disease and gloom. He listened to their keen lively conversation, and allowed himself to be drawn into its current. Carl was conscious of talking well and aptly, and of interesting his host; and he stayed so long that Grant was compelled to leave him. He scarcely knew how he had the courage and resolution to say farewell at last; but he awoke from a confused trance as his foot struck against the massive door-sill of the entrance-hall at Aston Court, and he felt that the next minute he should be in the presence of Miss Waldron.

Should he tell her where he had been, or keep it a secret from her? He felt guilty enough to know that he had gone very near the folly against which she had so emphatically warned him. Yet he was a free man, in bondage to no one. But did not any friendship, and especially a friendship so close and discriminating as Miss Waldron's, in some measure militate against freedom in its completeness? Did he not owe a return of frankness and confidence to one who was so entirely, so sweetly open to him? Yet, on the other hand, what had he to tell? He could not confess that he had put his hat down on the table close to Hester's work, and tried her thimble on each of his own fingers. His veins tingled at the recollection. No; there was nothing to say about his visit, and it would only give rise to misapprehension in Miss Waldron's mind if he mentioned it.

With this reflection, amounting almost to a resolution, he went on into the drawing-room, where, the servant told him, volunteering the information with a covert smile,

he would find Miss Waldron. She greeted his arrival with the blandest of welcomes, and invited him to a seat upon an ottoman placed near to her own lounging chair in front of a window. She was herself in the shade of the curtains, which shed a becoming hue over her somewhat faded face.

"You have been absent for some time," she said, softly; "it is more than an hour since I went to the library to look for the seventh volume of Kitto, and you were then gone away. Have you been making some visits among our people?"

"I went to see Grant," answered Carl, with an air of hesitation.

"To be sure," she continued; "I suppose he is now very busy with his preparations. Is there nothing I can do to help them on? You know for *your* sister I should be delighted to do anything in my power; only I suppose we shall lose you when she comes to Little Aston."

Miss Waldron heaved a sigh, which spoke inexpressible things, and remained silently musing, with a sad eye fixed upon the future, for some moments. She then resumed her conversation rather abruptly.

"Then you only went to see Mr. Grant?" she said.

"No, not exactly," stammered Carl; "at least, I went only with the intention of seeing him, but he asked me to go across with him to Mr. Morley's."

"Indeed!" said Miss Waldron, with a significant coldness in her tone; and then she betook herself to silence, which extracted more information from Carl than the most persevering cross-examination would have done.

"We went across," he said, in hurried accents; "and as Mr. Morley was engaged, Grant took me up stairs into the workshop, where the binding is done. Hester was there, but we stayed only a few minutes, and then we

came down to see Mr. Morley. He is, as Grant says, a singular study; and it is possible that I may do him good."

"And get harm to yourself," she replied, forebodingly.

"No, I think not," he said; "but if it were so, should I do well to set my own welfare before his? Ought I never to run any risk to myself for the sake of the souls of my people? We applaud those who go into a plague-house at the peril of their own lives; and should not I, in my ministry to others, sometimes lose sight of my own soul?"

"He spoke with ardor and agitation, while Miss Waldron fixed upon him a dull gaze of wonder and disapprobation.

"I do not agree with you," she said; "no charge can be so important as that of our own soul. But I will pray for you that you may not be overtaken in a snare. Would it not be a help to you if we met one another at the throne of grace at some stated time?"

Carl was perplexed, and looked questioningly into Miss Waldron's face.

"I scarcely understand," he said.

"I mean, shall we appoint a season when we may both pray in our own closets, with the knowledge that the other is similarly engaged at the same moment? It is a great help to those who try it."

Carl shaded his eyes with his hand, and steadily studied the pattern of the carpet before he replied. A man of his age and temperament is often more bashful, not to say modest, than a woman of Miss Waldron's years and disposition. He did not raise his eyes, and he looked very much put out of countenance.

"I think not," he murmured; "there is such a solemn secrecy in prayer between God and our souls. I feel as

if we ought to be alone before Him. Some may find it a help, but I think it would distract me."

A silence of several minutes followed, which was becoming almost terrible to him; when at last Miss Waldron broke it in tones of profound emotion,—

"Still I will pray for you," she said, "and watch for your soul. I proposed it for your sake only, that you might feel that you were not contending with the tempter alone. You are not alone,—you never will be while I remain your friend."

She rose, sobbing, and retired, it may be supposed, to her closet; leaving Carl in an uncomfortable state of doubt as to whether he had not behaved like a brute.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A PERILOUS PATH.

THE marriage of Grant with Carl's sister was celebrated as soon as they could enter into possession of their pleasant house on the road to Aston Court. It was within a few hundred yards of the park gates, and in the direct route between the Court and the town. As soon as Grant returned from the necessarily brief tour of a young country surgeon, Carl quitted Aston Court, and took up his permanent abode in their new home.

Miss Waldron had manifested a very charming interest in everything relating to Carl's sister ; and had added several ornaments and luxuries to her dwelling even before having seen her. Nothing could surpass the emphasis of her patronage and kindness to the young wife, upon her entrance into her new sphere. Oddly enough, there was a superficial resemblance between Annie Grant and Rose Morley, which struck painfully upon Mr. Waldron, though it escaped the observation of his daughter. She possessed the same slight and girlish figure, and the same fair hair and blue eyes ; yet the similarity of circumstances and position, in the first pride and happiness of marriage, may have formed the chief resemblance between them. The same impression was produced by her on the mind of Hester. She had not been witness to the gay and innocent importance of a young wife since she had seen it in her stepmother. The old memories rushed back like a

flood upon her, and the old sadness, which had been lighter of late, once more returned to her face.

It is probable that John Morley himself was oppressed by this likeness; for even his friendship for Grant and Carl, a passive, undemonstrative sort of friendship, was not strong enough to induce him to traverse the market-square of Little Aston, and approach the gates of Aston Court, in order to pay a wedding visit to the young doctor and his bride. Annie Grant went to see him, but her gay looks, her cheerful voice, and the bright colors of her dress, all jarred upon his morbid nature. After her visit, he had an access of melancholy which reacted upon Hester. They felt that they dwelt apart in a charmed circle, which they could not pass, and which no other could enter. Yet there was one other encircled by the same heavy chain who could no more escape from it than they could. Robert Waldron stood aloof from all the small festivities of the honeymoon; and his obvious melancholy strengthened the link between him and Hester. These others, so glad and happy, and hopeful, what had they in common with her? Their eyes were too dazzled with light to see clearly into the darkness where she and her father dwelt. She loved them with a love which excluded envy, but fate placed her altogether apart from them all.

She did not go so often as she might have done to Grant's house, or so often as Carl had, unconsciously to himself, hoped she would have done. He did not associate with her in the pleasant familiarity he had looked for. To be sure his actions were now free from the hourly scrutiny of Miss Waldron; but her kindly surveillance was not at an end. The distance between the two houses was not great, and there was no part of the town to traverse. She could come up in the most negligent and becoming morning costume, or even with a shawl thrown

over her evening toilette, to spend only a few minutes with dear Mrs. Grant, at the most unexpected of hours. Her studies were growing more profound than ever, and Carl's Hebrew and Greek were in perpetual request. She soon knew the place of every book upon his shelves better than he did, and often employed herself with setting them in order for him. He felt that he ought to be grateful, and he strove to be so. It was impossible for him not to be pleased and flattered.

Robert Waldron did not miss seeing his advantage, and making the most of it. Hester went the oftener to visit Madame Lawson, because she could take no pleasure in going to Grant's house ; and he did not fail to meet her there as often as he judged it prudent. It had become an unnecessary thing to make any excuse for seeing her thus, as Hester had fallen into a habit of taking it tacitly for granted. In a place so small as Little Aston it required some tact to prevent their meetings becoming known ; but he was a master of ingenuity. Besides, the entrance to the court was not commanded by any window, except those of the house where old Mr. Watson had used to live. The few inmates of the court were working folks, who had enough to do to mind their own business : and the woman of the house he gained over by judicious presents. There was positively no danger, either to Hester or him, of their secret being betrayed. He considered himself advancing, with sure and steady progress, towards his end.

Hester's new melancholy was rather a soft and tender sadness than the old, hard, gloomy monotony of the continual weight of dejection. There is a moment in the early dawn when the growing light seems to tremble and draw back a little, as if it would fain linger longer in the dark mantle of the night. Such a moment had come to

Hester. Her eyes had caught a light brightening on the horizon, and her heart had felt a glow of warmth reaching it; and for a moment or two longer she wished to keep her eyes closed, and take back the familiar chill to her heart. She knew herself no more. Caprices, foreign to her hitherto, had gained the mastery over her. Sometimes a passion of tears shook her; at others a vehement desire to exhaust herself by action, when the binding-press in the attic seemed like a refuge to her. The shrewd old Frenchwoman fancied she could read the girl's heart like an open book; and a hundred cunning little wrinkles netted themselves about her eyes and lips. She assured milord Robert that before long it would be quite safe to tell Hester of his love.

It was the hope, both of Mr. Waldron and Robert, that Grant's marriage might open the way naturally for once more inviting Hester to visit at Aston Court. The small festivities attending it might include her. When, therefore, Miss Waldron announced her opinion that it would be but a graceful courtesy to invite Grant, his bride, and Carl to dinner, with something of ceremony and state about it, Mr. Waldron gently insinuated that Hester, also, might be induced to join them, or rather that John Morley might listen to the invitation. Miss Waldron would probably have scouted the idea with indignation, had not Robert warmly seconded his father. She knew exactly how far she could venture in opposition to her brother; and it was very plain that he had so set his heart upon this as to make contradiction dangerous.

In consequence, Mr. Waldron was permitted to introduce the subject to John Morley, which he did in an informal manner at the close of a Sunday evening service, judging it best to take him utterly by surprise. Mr. Waldron had shaken hands with Hester, and looked into her

face with one of his half-fatherly glances of affection, when he turned to John Morley with an air as if he had but just thought of the matter.

"By the-by, Mr. Morley,"—he had dropped the epithet, brother, some time ago,—“Grant and our young minister, with Mrs. Grant, dine with us to-morrow. I think you ought to let my little friend Hester come with them. She wants some young society. Give me your promise that she shall come to-morrow.”

He waited with ill-concealed anxiety for the answer, and John Morley looked keenly but silently at him; longing to inquire whether Robert was at Aston Court, for he knew nothing of his movements, yet unable to pronounce his name.

“Should you like to go, Hester?” he asked.

Hester’s heart had bounded with mingled surprise and pleasure at Mr. Waldron’s invitation. For the last week or two time had been very monotonous and irksome to her, and she felt a girl’s natural desire for some change.

Besides there was no shock to her in the idea of meeting Robert Waldron, whom she had seen so often of late.

“I should like it very much, she answered, “if you would not be grieved, father.”

“No, no,” he said, hurriedly. “She shall come, Mr. Waldron, she shall come.”

John Morley drew his daughter’s hand through his arm, as they passed through the chapel porch, and looked down upon her questioningly by the light of the lamp hanging over the entrance.

“Hester,” he said, with a new tone of tenderness in his voice, “Hester, they invite you now to their parties. Is it that you are grown up into a woman?”

“I suppose so, father,” she answered, half gayly and half sadly.

"How old are you then, child?" he asked.

"I am nearly twenty," she replied.

"Twenty!" echoed John Morley. "And I have taken no count of the years! Your mother was older than you when I married her; and she has been dead these nineteen years. Have you any thought of being married, Hester?"

The question was put in simple seriousness, but in the tone rather of a friend, than of a father, who might expect to have a voice in the matter. Hester's hand trembled a little upon his arm, but he did not perceive it.

"How should I, father," she said.

"Ah! how should you?" he repeated. "You see no one, and know no one. Yet, my child, I should like to know that you were happily married. When I think of it I feel that I have done you a great wrong. But you shall go this once to Aston Court. Have you any pretty dress you can wear, child?"

It was so extraordinary a thing for John Morley to concern himself in so frivolous a subject as dress,—his own or anyone else's—that Hester could scarcely believe she had heard him aright. Her wardrobe was scanty, for money was scarce, and becoming more so every month; but she assured him, with an evasion very like a deviation from strict truth, that she should do very well.

"Hester," he said, when they had reached a dark part of the street, and she could not see his face, though she could detect a sharp anguish in his voice, "do you know if his son is at home?"

"Yes," she answered softly, and pressing his arm to her side.

"You will see him, and speak to him," he resumed. "I cannot. God forgive me in this, if I sin in it. I believe it would kill me to meet either of them; and I am

not fit to die yet. But they say he is contrite and repentant. I give you my consent to see him."

The confession that she had already seen him trembled upon Hester's lips ; but the recollection of his prolonged agony of despair sealed them. If she had had anything definite to tell him about Rose she would have had the courage to do it ; but to say only that she was lost would be simply to awaken the sharpness of his grief again. She resolved to pursue her course of concealment, and to hide everything from him that could add to his sorrow. It was a perilous path for a young girl to choose.

Robert heard that Hester was positively coming to Aston Court, with a delight which he could scarcely disguise. Ever since he had come to the conclusion that she, and she alone, could satisfy his fastidious notions of what his wife must be, he had longed to avail himself of the advantages his position and surroundings gave to him. Hitherto she had met him only in Madame Lawson's garret ; and he wished her to see him in his own sphere,—the master of a position which must dazzle her young mind. He contrasted with self-gratulation the sumptuous elegance and costly taste which he had introduced into his father's mansion, with the bareness and poverty of her own home. All the next morning he sauntered about the handsome rooms, and the terraces, where still lingered much of beauty, even in the later days of autumn. He pleased himself with picturing Hester at his side, expressing more by looks than words her shy pleasure in this loveliness and luxury. By a curious perversity of reasoning, he had begun to regard a marriage with her as a fitting compensation for the wrong he had been guilty of towards her family. He felt sure that he could make his father acknowledge the strength of his arguments ; but how could

he convince John Morley? He must secure Hester's love first.

The evening came, and the hour when Hester should arrive. Miss Waldron had sent a carriage to Grant's house, for Carl was suffering from a cold, which made it necessary to load him with most gentle attentions. She had, however, let Hester slip out of her mind; and as Annie Grant and Carl had no knowledge of her accepted invitation, they had, of course, come without her. Robert felt a wrathful pang of disappointment; though he was not altogether sorry that Carl and Hester had not been riding in the same carriage. Mr. Waldron himself was keenly disappointed. The night was dark and foggy, and Hester had no one to escort her through the lonely park. Miss Waldron said she was sorry with a lurking smile of satisfaction, and busied herself to see that Carl had the warmest seat by the fire. Robert made no complaint, but went out quietly to order the carriage back to Little Aston, and at the moment that he passed through the hall, the large doors were thrown open by a servant, and Hester herself appeared upon the threshold.

She stood still for an instant, with a glance, half-frightened, into the great hall, which was brilliantly lit up. Her lips were slightly parted, and her breath came flutteringly with the speed at which she had been walking, and her large grey eyes were still deep and dark with the darkness through which she had come. The night, with its thick fog, looked black behind her, while the colored pavement of the hall and the stained glass of the lamp over her head, made the foreground rich in tone. The strong contrast of light and shadow, with Hester standing on the line which separated them, looking lonely, embarrassed, and timid, formed a perfect picture to Robert's eyes. He hurried forward to welcome her, and the servant drew back respectfully.

"Is it possible you have come all alone?" he asked.

"I had no one to come with me," she replied. "I went to Mrs. Grant's, but she was gone. I was obliged to walk on alone or return home."

"Did you wish to come so much?" he said, lowering his voice. "Are you, then, glad to be here again, Hetty?"

Her answer was not ready, and her eyes drooped till he could see the nervous quivering of the long eyelashes.

"I think I am," she said at last; "I am not sure. In some things it seems scarcely right to be here; but still I am a little glad."

The gladness was so qualified, and the qualification so conscientiously expressed, that Robert did not know what to reply.

"Go and take off your shawl," he said, touching it lightly with his hand; "I will wait here for you to take you in the drawing-room."

He watched her intently as she followed his sister's maid up the broad low steps of the staircase with a subdued and quiet grace which was perfectly in tune with his matured taste. He paced up and down the hall, chafing at every moment she was away. There were twenty minutes yet till the hour for dinner, and he would keep her all to himself for that short period. Impatient as he was, he did not see her descend the staircase, and did not know she was close beside him, so noiseless was her approach, until she spoke in tremulous accents, and then he started violently. There was a scarcely-mastered excitement in herself which lent a color to her cheek, and when she placed her hand upon his offered arm, he felt that it was trembling.

"We will not go into the drawing-room just yet," he said; "I have a painting or two to show you."

He led her into a room which had been built especially for his own use, since his return to Aston Court. It

was lofty and spacious, and wainscotted throughout by carved panels of some light wood which had a pleasant lustre upon its surface. There were a few good pictures and here and there a handsome cabinet or book-case. At one end was an organ which he had ordered to be made for this particular place, that the volume of sound should suit the space exactly ; for he had become almost a master of music. A piano stood beside the organ. There was nothing of beauty or luxury lacking which his heart could desire ; and over all a soft light was shed by shaded lamps. He led Hester to the hearth, and placed her in a low chair before the fire. There he stood, with his arm resting on the mantel-piece, looking down upon her drooping head and shy, almost awkward, attitude of embarrassment. How poorly she was dressed, in her grey stuff gown, with her sole ornament, a little silver brooch, fastening the collar round her graceful throat. There was not a maid-servant in the Court who could not have put on a smarter dress to go out on a visit. It would form an odd contrast with his sister's toilette, and the unfaded finery of the young wife. But he liked it well. The very poverty and simplicity of Hester's appearance was charming to him. Perhaps she guessed partly what he was thinking about as his downward gaze scrutinized her, for she glanced up to him with a smile of singular archness and sweetness.

"I am not very fit for such a grand place," she said.

Not fit for such a grand place ! Robert's heart bounded, and the blood tingled through his veins. What did Hester mean, wont as she often was to betray her thoughts with innocent frankness ? Has she been thinking of herself as—as— ? Robert could not finish the sentence in his own mind. What should he say to her ? It would be something excessively significant, or excessively commonplace. How much dare he say to her ?

The opportunity of saying anything was snatched from him; for, while he hesitated, the door opened, and Mr. Waldron made his appearance. He did not see Hester until she rose from her low chair, and then he arrested himself with an exclamation of astonishment.

"Why, Robert! Why, Hester!" he ejaculated.

Robert was never at a loss as to what to say to his father, and now he found himself able to speak fluently.

"I found Miss Morley just come in," he said; "and as she was both cold and agitated by her lonely walk through the park, I brought her in here for a few minutes before taking her into the drawing-room."

"Oh!" was all that Mr. Waldron could at first reply. He knew that his son must have seen Hester at the time that he was lying ill in John Morley's house; but he had no idea that any intimacy could have been founded upon that ill-omened introduction. He recovered, however, from his profound amazement enough to give Hester a most cordial welcome; and then he conducted her himself to join the rest of the party.

It was a more than usually pleasant evening both to Miss Waldron and Robert. She kept possession of Carl, and paid him every possible attention; while Robert scarcely quitted Hester's side. This devotion did not escape his sister's observation, but it served her purpose well; and she could not descry any danger in it. It kept Carl away from Hester, and threw him solely upon her blandishments. Robert's delight in Hester increased hour after hour; and when the evening was ended, and she had gone away, this time in the carriage which also contained Carl, he resolved to ask his father's counsel and consent to his marriage with John Morley's daughter before many more days had passed.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A HUSBAND FOR HESTER.

FOR several months past Mr. Waldron's first earthly wish had been, as we know, to see his son married. He was satisfied for his daughter to remain unmarried, as she adorned a single life by so much zeal and devotion ; and perhaps he was reconciled to it the more readily as his family name would not be transmitted through her to posterity. But already Robert had attained an age when a man grows more difficult to please, and more discriminating as to feminine perfections. Hester ought to have been a hundred-fold more flattered by his preference than she could have been by the love of Carl Bramwell. Mr. Waldron's search after a daughter-in-law, whose price should be above rubies, was becoming an almost despairing pursuit ; and Robert gave him no assistance. On the contrary, he appeared to be settling down into an indolent, self-indulgent bachelorhood. The day following that on which he had found Hester seated at Robert's fireside, with him leaning over her in a lover-like attitude that had struck him with amazement, the father and son walked out amicably together over the farm-lands belonging to Aston Court. Both felt that the time was come when they must speak to one another upon that which occupied their thoughts ; and Robert preferred doing so as far from the presence of Miss Waldron as possible. He accompanied his father to the end of a stubble-field which was

to lie fallow during the winter, and then he commenced the conversation in as composed a tone as if he were making some agricultural observations.

"I think, father," he said, "that it is time I married."

Mr. Waldron planted his stick firmly into the soil, as if he intended it to take root there, and gazed anxiously into his son's face.

"To be sure, Robert ; to be sure," he cried.

"You were surprised to find Hester alone with me yesterday," he continued.

"I was," replied Mr. Waldron, briefly.

"Father," he resumed, stammering a little, "it was not at all the first time I have seen her of late. We know one another very well. The fact is, I happened to meet with her in the house of an old Frenchwoman."

"You don't mean the mother of John Morley's workman?" interrupted Mr. Waldron.

"Yes," said Robert, "I have met her there many times during the last few months."

"Robert," interrupted his father again, with an expression and tone the most severe he could assume towards him, "you cannot mean to tell me that you, a man of the world, knowing how ready the world is to gossip, can have taken advantage of Hester's ignorance to draw her into a clandestine intercourse with you?"

"I have," owned Robert, in some confusion.

"I wonder how you dare to confess it," continued Mr. Waldron, leaning heavily upon his stick, as if his son's words had wounded him deeply; "she is so simple, so unsuspecting! She did not know to what censure she exposed herself. Suppose your sister had found it out!"

Mr. Waldron's face wore an aspect of real terror; but Robert smiled a little to himself.

"I took care that nobody should know," he said; "you

need not be afraid for Hester. But now you will not be surprised to hear me say that I love her more than any woman I ever saw ; ay, more than I ever supposed I could love. It seems to me that there can be no love in the world like that I feel for my little Hetty."

Robert's handsome face, with its new air of profound and passionate tenderness, looked handsomer than ever as he spoke ; and his father, regarding him fondly, fancied that any woman would forgive him any previous folly.

"But have you forgotten the past," he said.

"Forgotten it !" he exclaimed ; "have you or my sister suffered me to forget it ? Forget it ! Why, I have only to look into Hester's face with all its sweetness and beauty, and there I see my sin written legibly in its sad lines. How can I forget, when it is Hester herself I love, in spite of everything."

"But what can be done ?" asked Mr. Waldron, despondingly.

"I want to atone to her for all these years she has lost," he answered, with vehement earnestness. "I will make her after-life so bright that she shall forget all early sorrow. I will lift her out of the miserable confined lot that is hers, and give her a rank and wealth she could never reach without me. If she was but my wife I should have no fear for her happiness."

"But it is morally impossible," objected Mr. Waldron ; "John Morley—"

"He must consent," interrupted Robert, "if I only make sure of Hester. He is very poor, almost to bankruptcy. He is ageing fast, and Hester's future must be an anxiety to him. He is already reconciled to you, and has allowed her to visit here, knowing that she must meet me. If you will only help me, he will come round in time. He must—he shall."

For a few minutes both father and son were plunged in profound thought. The rooks flew heavily above their heads, disturbed by their presence, and manifesting their discontent by hoarse cawing. The young cattle came near enough to contemplate them with their brown eyes. There was a sharp struggle going on in Mr. Waldron's mind which was scarcely visible in his face, so long accustomed to hide his emotions. He was, as his old minister had told him, a proud man; and he had sometimes regarded John Morley as a person in a very inferior position. John Morley was, in fact, nothing more than a tradesman, and one in difficult circumstances; and it was his only son, his heir, who wished to bring the daughter of the poor bookseller into his wealthy family as his wife. Yet Hester was so pretty, so simple, so clever; she was so good also, that, but for the accident of her birth, there could be no one more worthy of being his daughter-in-law. Besides, Robert was very obstinate if he was opposed. He would refuse to look out for a more suitable wife, if he should deny him his consent and assistance.

"I talked about it with Mr. Watson before his death," said Robert, at last breaking through the silence, "and he said he did not see any insuperable difficulties, or any insurmountable objections in the way. He did not seem to see them so clearly as I did."

"He was a timid man," replied his father, "and would agree to all you said. But how did he come to know of before me?"

"He saw me once or twice follow Hester into the court," he answered, "and he had courage enough to speak very faithfully on the subject, I assure you. Well, he did not see why Hester should not in time become my wife. He said, however, that it would be more likely to come to pass if we only knew for certain that poor Rose

was dead. It is my firm conviction that she is dead ; but I can get no proofs."

"Robert," said Mr. Waldron, earnestly, "you are losing sight of John Morley's implacable hatred. Ah! my boy, you kept from me the history of that blow which almost killed you last February. It was then you first saw Hester and fell in love with her. I do not wonder at it. But do you imagine that if he seeks your life, you can ever gain his consent or hers?"

"I think," answered Robert, "that his revenge spent itself in that blow. He is a good man, a religious man. He was hurried by a sudden passion into the attempt to commit that crime ; but as it failed,—luckily for me,—he soon repented of it, and was not sorry to extend his kindness to me. We have now something to forgive one another. I am more equal with him, and that is so much in my favor. Why else was he so hospitable and kind towards me? He visited me once, and spoke as a friend would have done. He knew Hester saw me often, and yesterday he allowed her to come once more to our house. I hardly dared to hope before ; but now with you to help me, I shall win Hester as my wife."

His face, dearer to Mr. Waldron even than that of his daughter, shone with more gladness and hope than had been seen upon it for many years. His father could object no longer, but gave his hand a warm and fervent grasp.

"I will help you, my boy," he said ; "yet I had my own little scheme for Hester, and it is possible it may prove in your way now. The moment I set my eyes on young Bramwell, I thought he would make a good husband for the little girl. They were both so young, so good, and so handsome. Our family owes John Morley a compensation, and I fancied I had found it in him. I would have

given her a wedding dowry that would have made them almost independent of his Church, wherever he goes. But now I hope he will not be in your way."

He looked anxious lest he should himself have destroyed the chances of his son's happiness. Robert also was grave, counting up all the symptoms he had detected of love between Carl and Hester. They were very few, almost none. It had not escaped his notice that his sister was making herself foolish, as he termed it, about the eloquent young preacher, ten years her junior, and he built some hopes upon that; the more so as Carl came frequently to Aston Court and spent a good deal of time with Miss Waldron. Under other circumstances he would probably have manifested his disapprobation of such an intimacy with unmistakable plainness, but he hailed it as a sign that Carl preferred his sister's mature piety to Hester's girlish prettiness; and he was more than content to let the intimacy run a smooth course.

"I am not much afraid of him," he said; "yet I should have been quite as well pleased if you had chosen a more commonplace man for Little Aston."

"I chose him for Hester," replied Mr. Waldron, in a tone which betrayed a lingering reluctance to abandon his favorite scheme; "they are just suited for each other. I thought so last night. I wish you could give up this notion, Robert."

"Never!" he exclaimed, vehemently. "I tell you I worship her. She is the only woman who can make me care for goodness or religion, or things of that sort. I have had enough to disgust me with it, but Hester makes it soothing and pleasant again. If I am ever to be anything but the idle, purposeless fellow I am, doing no good in life, it will be by winning Hester."

Mr. Waldron sighed deeply, but he did not attempt to

explain his sigh. Robert's state of mind was still, as it had always been, a grief to him ; but he had come to the point of no longer pressing religious expostulation upon him. His sigh, however, included something more than that. There was a misgiving in it lest Carl, whom he had brought to Little Aston for the very purpose, had not already gained possession of Hester's love. But deeper still lay an unconquerable dread that it would be impossible to overcome John Morley's instinctive repugnance to give his daughter to the man who had brought so indelible a stigma upon his name. Every one else might plead the youth and thoughtlessness of the college lad, for Robert had been little more than that ; but could it be hoped for that dishonored husband should thus excuse him, or could ever be brought to look upon his conduct as the careless folly of a boy who had not learned to master his passions? They walked homewards in almost unbroken silence, and Mr. Waldron shut himself up in his private room to deliberate upon all the bearings of the matter.

CHAPTER XXXV.

CONSULTING CARL.

THE more Mr. Waldron considered the subject upon which Robert had consulted with him, the more dubious he grew as to the possibility of winning over John Morley, unless, indeed, Hester's own happiness should depend upon his consent. He endeavored to place himself in the position of the dishonored man ; but the power of seeing with other people's eyes cannot be acquired at the age of sixty-eight. He saw his son, handsome, accomplished, and rich, with a brilliant lot to offer ; and he could see Hester clearly, as a very eligible daughter-in-law in every respect, except by birth. There had been always a peculiar softness in his heart towards Hester,—an anticipatory tenderness, perhaps. He would like exceedingly to have her always near to him. But John Morley was, as he always had been, wrapped in an impenetrable mystery. He could no more understand him, members as they were of the same church, than Peter could understand his beloved brother Paul.

Mr. Waldron glanced but briefly towards the world, though, no doubt, it would have something to say to such a marriage. Ten years ago its tongue had been busy with the story of Robert's sin ; and the world has a retentive memory for scandals. It would, perhaps, be easier to pacify John Morley himself than to satisfy its scruples, sometimes more exacting and delicate than those of an

individual conscience. But Mr. Waldron was not accustomed to consider the world. He had long since turned his back upon it, and treated its opinions with contempt. If he approved of the matter, and the Church supported him, he could very well afford to leave all question of the world out of the transaction.

To make sure of the pastor was one means of securing the approbation of the Church. He did not wish to startle or shock that small congregation of faithful men over whom he and Carl Bramwell presided. They were a simple, uncultivated class, not accustomed to split straws, but it was within the bounds of possibility that they might be scandalized by his son's marriage with Hester Morley. There was a broad though undefined code of Christian morality written most plainly upon unsophisticated hearts which he was afraid of transgressing; and upon this one weak point he yearned for the sympathy of his fellow-churchmen. It was not a formal approbation that he could receive or they give, but simply the encouragement of unchanged looks and undiminished reverence. He resolved, first of all, to sound their young pastor.

It was late in the November afternoon, and Carl was deeply absorbed in study, with that utter oblivion of the outer life which is known only to students. Certainly there was a pleasant impression of the previous evening hovering about him like a sunny mist, and mingling subtly with every movement of his thoughts. He came up from the depths at the entrance of Mr. Waldron into his study, with something of the bewilderment of a pearl-diver who has been long under the water. It was not for a moment or two quite clear to himself who he was, or who was the intruder coming in with all the freedom and ease of a patron.

"I wish to have a confidential conversation with you,"

said Mr. Waldron, after a few minutes' desultory talk ; it is strictly a family matter. You are already well acquainted with the circumstances of my son's sojourn in John Morley's house."

"Certainly," answered Carl, starting into a very keen, quick-eared attention.

"You know, too, the whole history of his second wife," he continued ; "I am far from casting undue blame upon her, but she was a giddy, childish young woman, with no steady principles to protect her. There had been some love-making between her and Robert at Oxford, before she had ever seen John Morley. She was fully as old as he was, therefore, as a woman, she may be considered several years older. She came here, heard nothing of Robert for a year or two, and at last married for a home. You know the rest."

"Yes," said Carl, his elbow resting on his desk and his hand shading his eyes.

"Tell me," resumed Mr. Waldron, "what you suppose the consequences must be to my son? He has long since repented of his sin. Is he to bear the burden of it his life through?"

"Nay," answered Carl, his lips parting with a smile of great tenderness ; "you, who are an elder in the Church, know the grace of God better than I can do. There is no burden of sin we may not cast away before the face of the Father."

"But are the consequences to remain?" asked Mr. Waldron. "Is he always to bear the stigma of his sin? Is he not free to act as if he had never been guilty? Ought the transgression to be forgiven by every man as well as by God?"

Carl paused. There was a swift current of sympathy and love running clear and unobstructed through his young

spirit which carried him irresistibly towards the side of mercy. He was as yet a mere student in human nature, and had no actual wrestle with temptation. He had not seen sin face to face. At present it was a veiled and awful form for him ; he had not beheld its hideous features, and received the ineffaceable memory upon his heart.

“None of the sins that he hath committed shall be mentioned unto him,” he said in a lowered and reverent voice.

“You yourself would act upon that,” pursued Mr. Waldron. “My son is the same in your eyes as though he never was guilty of this sin.”

“Perhaps not altogether that,” answered Carl ; “but who among us would enforce a penalty if God does not ? If He will make no more mention of his transgression, why should we ?”

It was Mr. Waldron's turn to pause and reflect. His anxious face grew darker, and the knotted veins in his forehead became larger. He did not feel quite, sure of Robert's repentance, though he longed to believe in it. He wished to believe that his own prayers through so many years, had not failed in the court of heaven. Perseverance in an earthly court must have prevailed before this. He argued illogically. Because he had so earnestly prayed that his son might truly repent, his professed repentance must be sincere.

“Mr. Bramwell,” he said, suddenly, “what do you think of Hester Morley ?”

If Carl had been asked unexpectedly what he thought of the cherubim, he could not have been more stupefied or at a loss. He gazed blankly at Mr. Waldron, and did not reply till that gentleman repeated the question.

“Oh ! I think she is very good,” he answered somewhat

coldly ; " she is a member of the Church, and an excellent daughter. My sister is very much attached to her."

" You have not seen much of her ? " remarked Mr. Waldron.

" Very little," he replied.

" Would it astonish you ; " said Mr. Waldron, hesitating ; " would it shock you in any way if you heard that my son, having seen her a good deal while he was ill this spring, was very anxious, nay, bent upon making her his wife ? "

" Impossible ! " ejaculated Carl, starting from his seat as if he had been shot. He took a hasty turn or two across his study, and then came back to his chair opposite his visitor. " I think I must have misunderstood you," he said with a ghastly effort at a smile. " Did you say that Mr. Robert Waldron wishes to make the daughter of John Morley his wife ? "

" Yes," replied Mr. Waldron, briefly.

" It is impossible ! " said Carl. " Your son's sin demands great charity from us ; but he must not ask Hester to share the burden he has to bear all his life long. Oh, it would not be possible ! "

" But is my son never to marry ? " asked Mr. Waldron.

" Yes ! " cried Carl ; " let him find some one with a spirit which would not be bowed down by such a burden. But Hester is too young, too ignorant of life, too simple-hearted. He would do well with a wife like his sister, strong in her own faith, and able to fight with him against his spiritual foes. Why should Hester's young and innocent heart be joined to one which must ever bear the sting of a sore repentance ? "

" You are a young man, yourself," said Mr. Waldron, as Carl paused ; " a very young man. There are scores, hundreds of marriages,—ay ! and happy ones,—where there

has been an early folly like this. Hester would be rich, happy, and beloved. If John Morley should be reconciled to Robert, he would become a member of our Church, and would be ready to take my place in it when I am gone. Moreover, there was something in Hester's manner last night which makes me hope that she is not averse to Robert. You may have seen it yourself—a pretty, pensive, gentle pleasure in listening to him.”

“Yes,” replied Carl, who had watched Hester furtively during the whole of the previous evening, and who had seen every little gesture and every expression of enjoyment that had escaped her.

“Then if she loves him,” resumed Mr. Waldron, “and if that folly of his youth should not be remembered against him now he is a man, I see no impediment to their marriage. I see in it rather a compensation for the past. If John Morley's poverty and shame have come from us, surely the honor of marrying his daughter into our family ought to balance it. Do you agree with me?”

Carl's restless hand moved absently among his papers. His face had grown pale, and his bright, keen sight, dim. Until this moment he had looked at John Morley's misery from the outside. By temperament he was profoundly sympathetic, and was touched to the quick by the feelings of others. But by this very law of his nature he had regarded John Morley and his exaggerated grief from the point of view of the Waldrons, with whom he had been most closely associated. He had placed himself in the position of Robert, and pleaded for him all the excuses he would have sought for himself. But now he seemed to look into the very heart of John Morley,—that heart on fire, as Grant had once called it. That Hester Morley should love Robert Waldron! That she should ever become his wife! He pushed away the hair which had fallen

over his forehead, and gazed fixedly at Mr. Waldron, who said, "Do you think with me?"

"I think," cried Carl, in an irrepressible frenzy, "that the idea is monstrous! There are some sins which cannot be forgotten. It would be a horrible thing, an unheard-of thing."

"Perhaps you love Hester yourself," Mr. Waldron suggested.

Carl hastened to regain his self-control. Mr. Waldron's face was one of sharp and anxious scrutiny; and he did not wish to subject himself to any more pointed questions.

"I was thinking of her father only," he answered; "I believe that to him it will appear more monstrous than it does to me."

"Carl," said Mr. Waldron, in an accent of pity, "I like you; ay, I honor and trust you. In bringing you here I thought it probable that you would love Hester. But this is my son's whole chance of happiness; perhaps for the life to come as well as this. It may be his salvation. You possess a better and holier happiness. Promise me, at least, that you will not use your influence against him."

"I have, perhaps, no right to influence her," answered Carl, sighing; but I will commit her to His care who judges all men. If my prayers can shield her from peril, they shall not fail her."

His heart sank a little after he had given this implied promise to stand aside while she was tempted with all that ambition and love could offer her. The sole weapons he could use in her defence were the prayers and teachings she would listen to from his mouth in the public services of the chapel.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HOW COULD IT END?

SCARCELY had Mr. Waldron closed the house-door after himself, having considerably forbidden Carl to quit his warm room, when a light rap at his study-door recalled Carl from his painful reflections upon the interview which had just ended. The second intruder was Annie, who carried a little work-basket in her hand, and came in boldly with an air which plainly announced that she intended staying with him for a time.

"Now, Carl," she said, "it is all nonsense you pretending you can study with that dreadful cold. My husband,"—she uttered the word with a little bridling of the head, which showed that the title was still a new one,— "has been called out, and does not expect to be home till late. He said I was to come here and sit with you, and you were on no account to leave this room till bedtime. So I am going to order tea up here, and we will have a nice, quiet, cosy evening together, you dear old boy."

She rang for the servant to bring the tea-tray and bright brass kettle up stairs, and was very busy for a time in making the tea and toast by Carl's fire. He sat upon the hearth, watching her with dimmed eyes and a colorless face. Annie was quick-sighted, and the weariness of his expression did not escape her.

"Are you going to talk to me, Carl, or shall I talk to you?" she asked.

"I would a great deal rather you talked to me," he answered.

"I shall not say anything very wise, and I shall gossip," she said, threateningly.

Carl leaned back in his chair, and stretched his feet out towards the fire. He could not make conversation, even to Annie, that night. His mind was very busy, but very rambling, darting from one point to another of his interview with Mr. Waldron. Yet he was not sorry that Annie had invaded his solitude, and that her voice should prattle through the confusion of his thoughts. Now and then he caught a sentence of her lively gossip, and answered by a word or two. On her part she was weaving a very skilful and subtle web by which she might entrap his most secret sentiments; but she might as well have gone directly to her point, so insensible was he to her delicate handling.

"She is very fond of me," said Annie, in a tone of great significance; and, as he was thinking at the moment of Hester, the words startled him. "She said last night she loved me like a sister."

"I am very glad to hear it," he answered, earnestly.

"I wonder how old she is," remarked Annie.

Carl knew to a day Hester's age. She was four years and three months younger than himself. He had seen the date of her birthday in a book which had been given to her years ago, but he did not give his sister the information she desired.

"She perhaps looks younger than she is," said Annie; "I think she is very good; don't you, Carl?"

"Yes," he answered, in a very subdued tone.

"And she thinks you," continued his sister, "the very best, the very first, the most eloquent of men and minis

ters. Of course I agreed with her, but she said I was never to tell you so, Carl."

Carl's face grew crimson, and with the gesture most familiar to him, he shaded his eyes with his long hand; there were tears, he could not tell why, standing in them. Annie nestled to his side, and laid her head upon his shoulder.

"Dear old fellow," she said, "I daren't quite say that she is in love with you; but she is not far from it. And I am not quite sure that I should like it altogether. She is not exactly what I fancied your wife would be. I should think she cannot be less than six or seven years older than you; but she is very good and very rich, and her father is a great man among our people. Still I am not quite sure that I should like my brother Carl to become her husband."

Carl had suffered too severe a shock that evening to be staggered by this one. The deep flush faded gradually away from his face, and the tears dried under his eyelids, but he could not command his voice sufficiently to speak to Annie.

"So now," she said, kissing him affectionately, "your mind is prepared for it. I don't believe you have vanity enough for the notion to enter your head of itself, clever as you are. It would be a very grand thing for you, but I don't exactly see how it would turn out in the end. You are very fond of her, Carl."

"She is my friend," he answered, with parched lips and dry throat.

"Ah, yes!" said Annie, sagely; "but everybody knows what such friendships generally come to. I don't mean, Carl, that you might not go on very comfortably as a friend; but Miss Waldron will not. Mark my words, and make up your mind about it. Only if I were you, un-

less I really cared for her, I would not let her come here so often. I should think you could easily put a check upon that. It is not nice generally for men to marry women older than themselves, but she is everything else you like; isn't she? I wonder what Mr. Waldron and Mr. Robert will think of it!"

Carl felt glad that his sister's head was still lying upon his shoulder, and that she could not see his face. A profound sense of the derision with which at times life seems to flout and make a mock at us, filled his mind, and he laughed a short hoarse laugh, which grated upon his sister's ear.

"Why do you laugh, Carl?" she asked.

"I was laughing at Mr. Waldron," he answered, checking himself.

"Why," continued Annie, "would you really marry Miss Waldron if you were sure she would marry you? I was talking to Hester this morning; she came up here to fetch a book she had lent me, and I asked her if she had noticed anything peculiar in her manner last night."

"What did she answer?" asked Carl, with increasing interest.

"She was shy, as she always is, of speaking out her mind; but she said there was no doubt Miss Waldron was very fond of you."

"Fond of me!" repeated Carl; "did Hester say anything else?"

"She said what a pious woman Miss Waldron is," continued Annie; "everybody says the same. But now, my dear boy, do not be rash in any way. I am a whole year older than you, and I'm married, you know; so listen to what I have to say to you. A great many pious women are excessively disagreeable, I can tell you; they are so good that it does not seem worth while to be amiable.

"They may have a good deal of treasure laid up, but they have no small change for everyday use. One of your great divines said himself, that good nature was sometimes better than grace in a wife. Now I am afraid I have not so much treasure laid up as Miss Waldron, but I am not unpleasant to live with; at least James says so. Don't be in any hurry, in any way."

Carl fell into a train of troubled thoughts again. His friendship for Miss Waldron was pure and chivalrous, founded upon the gratitude he felt for her very gracious and flattering regard for himself. No idea that she cherished a sentiment one degree warmer than his own would ever have entered his mind, had not Annie placed it so plainly before him. But now that his eyes were opened he saw it distinctly, and knew that he could never be blind again. He passed in review the incidents of the preceding evening, and then his thoughts were brought round once more to the first painful subject which had occupied them.

"Annie," he said, in a very low and troubled voice, "do you think it possible for Hester ever to love Robert Waldron?"

"It looked very like it last night, Carl," she answered, gravely.

"But, good heavens!" cried Carl, forgetting his disapprobation of any words at all approaching the nature of an oath, "the thing is impossible."

"I have been thinking about it all the morning," resumed Annie, "and I partly understand how it can be. Hester has lived so apart from the world that she is still like a child in many things; and, Carl, as for sin! why, she looks at it as the angels might do. Of course we are bound to believe her corrupt and sinful, and all that sort of thing, I suppose; but I say that Hester no more knows

how to distinguish between sin and sin than an angel would. It is clear that Robert Waldron does not shock her in any way, but that she is rather attracted by him than otherwise. I saw her look at him, once or twice yesterday, with the open-eyed, wondering, unconscious gaze of a child. But at other times her eyes sank, and her face colored when he was talking to her. I am afraid she might love him."

"But what could be the end of it?" asked Carl, in a sharp accent.

"Ah! how could it end?" repeated Annie.

She raised her head from his shoulder, and turned her ear listening towards the window. There was a distant sound of hoof-beats coming on at a rapid rate, and a bright smile broke upon her face. She kissed Carl hastily, bidding him go to bed early that night, and left him to the undisturbed course of his meditations.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A DIRECT EFFORT.

FROM the time that Miss Waldron had become acquainted with the fact that a Popish Frenchwoman dwelt in idolatrous darkness within sight of the very walls of the chapel, where the gospel was preached every Sunday, though in a language unknown to her, she had resolved upon making her the subject of one of those direct efforts which had often so signal an effect upon the poor women of her district and mothers' meetings. She ordered from John Morley a packet of English tracts translated into French, and with these and a French Bible in her large satchel, she sallied forth, the morning after her father's interview with Carl, to seek the dwelling of the benighted foreigner.

It was about midday, and Madame Lawson was regaling herself with a savory ragout, highly-seasoned with garlic, which she was wont to have cooked in her landlady's oven. She had added to her repast a glass or two of good Burgundy, supplied to her by Robert Waldron, which she could only take at those meals when her son was absent, for fear of his discovering the secret of her distinguished visitor. She was in her most exhilarated mood. The noonday happened to be one of the rarely bright moments of November, and the high window of her garret caught the sunshine, while all the court below was in gloom. There was no fire in the grate, but a warm chaf-

frette filled with wood-ashes from the oven stood under her feet. The three little bronze crucifixes over the empty fire-place shone full in the brightest of the sunbeams, and were the first objects upon which Miss Waldron's eyes fell as she entered the garret.

Miss Waldron had not the proficiency in French which her brother possessed. She had never been out of her native isle, and her father, entertaining a true old-fashioned British contempt of foreigners, had never invited any to his house. Her acquaintance with the language was, in consequence, almost limited to a perusal of *Telemachus* and the works of *Madame de Genlis*, which she had gone through with her dictionary and a master. Madame received her with a torrent of patois, of which she barely understood one word ; but Miss Waldron was not to be daunted. She laid her packet of tracts upon the table and seated herself on a distant chair.

"You are a Frenchwoman," she said austerely.

Yes, Madame was a Frenchwoman from Bourgoyne, and she could not speak one word of English,—not one word. To speak English was like swallowing fish-bones.

"You are a Papist," observed Miss Waldron, who had scarcely understood the previous remarks.

Papist ! She did not comprehend what was Papist.

"Your religion is Papist," said Miss Waldron, pointing to the little crosses and rosary.

Yes, yes ; that was her religion. She was a Catholic. That was her chaplet ; she said her chaplet twice a day, sometimes oftener, if she was triste. When she felt very sad, she said a little prayer first, and then sang a song. Would she like to hear a song ?

Without waiting for permission, the gay old lady started off with one of her merriest songs ; her eyes growing smaller and brighter, and the cunning little wrinkles start-

rag out more and more wickedly at every line. Miss Waldron could not catch a word of the song, but she trembled at the thought of what she might be listening to, and her face grew a dull red. She moved uneasily in her chair, and glanced towards the door. At the last line of the song Madame winked,—positively winked at her visitor; and then crossed herself in so sudden a manner that Miss Waldron was still more dismayed.

"I am Miss Waldron," she said, entrenching herself behind the dignity of her name.

Waldron! Bah! She could not speak such a word. But was it not the name of the fine young milord Robert who did her the honor of paying her a visit sometimes? Quite an English milord, but with a beautiful toilette and with rings on his fingers, who could speak French like a Frenchman.

Miss Waldron was puzzled. It was not at all in Robert's line to visit poor old women; yet she knew that he could speak French fluently, and it was not probable that another person, possessing equal proficiency, could be found in Little Aston. But what could bring Robert there? The thought of Hester flashed across her like a ray of light.

"He is my brother," she answered, slowly, and with some difficulty, as she pondered over a totally unprepared phrase. She had arranged beforehand a conversation which ought to have proceeded like a catechism, but she was completely thrown out. She stammered and hesitated, but at last she was compelled to put her question in a bald, unvarnished manner. "Does he meet a girl called Hester Morley here?" she asked.

The smooth, clean face of Madame assumed the innocence of a child, combined with virtuous indignation. She answered firmly in the negative, with a gesture of utter repudiation; but Miss Waldron's aroused suspicions were not

to be rocked to sleep again. Hester came here, and she had learned that Robert did so too. What could it mean. Could it have any meaning but one?

"I am afraid," she said, in very incorrect French, for she was agitated, and her tongue tingled to speak in strong English, "that you are a very wicked woman. I knew you were a Papist and a Frenchwoman; but I am afraid you are worse. I came here with the purpose of doing you good, but I fear it is impossible. I shall speak about you to my father, Mr. Waldron, of Aston Court, who is a magistrate.

Madame Lawson could not understand many words of this speech, but she could see that the visitor was very greatly displeased. It occurred to her that she had come on a mission of suspicion and espionage, and she resolved to throw her off the scent. Her brown eyes,—eyes which betray nothing, met Miss Waldron's gaze, and a sinister air of intelligence spread over her face.

"Mademoiselle Hester comes to see me sometimes," she said, very distinctly, "but never, oh! never, when my lord Robert comes. There is a young priest at the chapel where Mademoiselle makes her prayers; and in England, the priests marry. He is very handsome and young, like Mademoiselle Hester. It is possible he may marry himself with her."

Miss Waldron's heart sank very low. That such a calamity was possible she could not conceal from herself; but it had never been put into words and uttered in her hearing. She was lost in distressed and perplexed thought, not able to ply the old woman with clever questions. Madame regarded her with a crafty smile. Grant had once brought Carl to see her, but the visit had made little impression upon her, except as awakening an odd interest in the priest who could marry if he chose. She was

conscious that she had made a happy hit, though she did not know exactly where it wounded.

"Does Hester love the young priest?" asked Miss Waldron at last, unable to cloak the inquiry more skilfully.

"It is necessary to love one's director," she answered, with a leer full of insinuation; "and he is so handsome, like *la petite*. It is also his duty to love all his people."

Both Madame and Miss Waldron had been too engrossed to catch the sound of the stair-case creaking under a footstep; but at this moment a sallow and withered face, with two eyes set in it like burning lamps, appeared at the half-open door. Madame uttered a little scream, and dexterously snatched the bottle of Burgundy from the table, putting it by a sleight of hand, into its hiding-place under her bed. But the new-comer paid no attention to her movements. He had taken off his old paper cap, and fastened upon Miss Waldron a gaze which did not permit his eyelids to wink. She experienced a very peculiar sensation of discomfort under the fixed scrutiny of these burning eyes.

"It is my son, Madame," said Lawson's mother, introducing him with an air of ceremony.

"Can you speak English, my good man?" inquired Miss Waldron.

"Certainly," replied Lawson; but before we go any further, may I ask what your name is?"

"Miss Waldron, of Aston Court," she said, with emphasis and dignity.

"So I guessed," he cried, clenching his hands; "you are a lady, and I'd be sorry to frighten you. But it is as much as your life is worth to come here. I am Mr. Morley's workman, and love Miss Hester. I knew her mother and the second Mrs. Morley. Now you'll see you'd better

not come here again. This is my house, and I will have nobody in it belonging to you or yours."

"I came here to convert your mother," said Miss Waldron, with great courage.

"Then she must go unconverted," he said, his tone rising to a higher pitch; "if you and yours are to go to heaven, then me and mine must go elsewhere. It is not safe for you here. John Morley and me are waiting—waiting till the right time comes; for there is deadly hatred betwixt us and you. You had better go at once, while I warn you. I'm a quiet man, but you had better go."

His voice had risen shrilly with each sentence, till now it rang in her ears with a shriek, which the children at play below heard, and stopped suddenly to listen. Miss Waldron seized her satchel and fled; and, as she hurried through the court the window above was opened violently and her loosened packet of tracts fluttered down about her like a flock of frightened doves.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SOMETHING MORE THAN A FRIEND.

AS Miss Waldron issued from the low passage leading to the court, Carl was hurrying past with long strides, and with his head bowed down as if heavy with momentous thoughts. She uttered a cry of joyful relief, and almost flung herself upon his arm. There was so evident a fright, both in her flurried manner and the startled expression on her face, that Carl gazed about him and peered down the narrow alley to ascertain the cause of it. She sobbed hysterically ; and having sufficient presence of mind to take advantage of the opportunity, she did not attempt to control her agitation, as she must have done had she been compelled to pursue her way alone, or had she met any other acquaintance. She leaned heavily and helplessly upon the arm of the embarrassed Carl. The street was quiet, but he glanced up and down it with a feeling of dismay. There needed but one or two observant passers-by to attract a whole crowd about them from the surrounding houses. The key of the chapel vestry was in his pocket, and the chapel was on the other side of the street.

“Would you like to sit down for a few minutes in the vestry?” he asked.

“Oh, yes ! yes?” said Miss Waldron, between her sobs.

Carl led her across the street, and once again he cast

a keen glance about him. There were only a few children to be seen at play. But no ; coming up the pavement was a light and tall figure, dressed in a soft grey dress which he knew very well to be Hester's. She was on the sunny side of the street, dazzled perhaps by the white wintry sunshine ; for she did not seem to see them in the shade, though he was a long time in fitting the key into the lock, in the hope that she would recognize them, and he could make a sign to her to come across to them. Miss Waldron did not see her.

"There is Miss Morley," said Carl ; "shall I run over and call her to come to you?"

"No," answered Miss Waldron, plainly enough, and without a sob this time ; "I would much rather not see her at this moment. I have something very extraordinary to tell you, Carl."

The name Carl seemed to fall from her lips unconsciously in her state of excitement ; but he felt a nervous tremor at the sound of it. He opened the vestry door and went in, with Miss Waldron still supporting herself upon his arm. He placed her in his own chair beside the table, and stood opposite her before the empty fireplace. Above it hung usually the portrait of a distinguished divine of their denomination, in a full-bottomed wig and white bands, at the back of which was a small looking-glass where the pastor of the church could take a stealthy glimpse of himself before ascending the pulpit. Carl had turned the portrait with its face to the wall the preceding Sunday ; and now, instead of the smooth and pious physiognomy of the eminent minister, he saw his own troubled features, with the straight eyebrows knitted and the lips pressed sternly together. Miss Waldron began to sob less deeply, but she sat with her head averted, and with an air of modest confusion which almost drove him frantic.

"Do you feel better?" he asked ; "can I do **any** for you?"

"I am better," she answered, faintly ; "in a minute or two I will tell you all."

For that minute or two Carl set himself to conquer his impatience and irritation. Why should he feel so different to-day from what he had felt only the day before yesterday? She was his friend still ; and he had only heard Annie's partial, and no doubt absurd, notion that she was something more than a friend. A true friendship between man and woman ought to be able to bear a greater shock than the misapprehension and misconstruction of others. He almost detested himself for the ready and ridiculous vanity which had caused him to give credence to the story ; yet the hot blood mounted to his beating temples as he caught a side-long glance from Miss Waldron.

"Carl," she said, in a voice as if it was still necessary to gasp for breath at each word, "I may call you Carl now, I think."

What could he answer? He bowed his head gravely, but without raising his eyes from the floor.

"I am a little older than you," she continued, with a frank air, "and I am so used to hear your dear sister call you Carl. That is how I slipped into it. To call you Mr. Bramwell now would seem formal. I am thankful it is only you who have seen my agitation. It is foolish and silly, I know, but then I am nothing but a weak foolish woman."

"You have been very much alarmed," remarked Carl, falteringly.

"Oh ; exceedingly!" exclaimed Miss Waldron, her hand pressed upon her heart ; "and I am so grateful to the Providence which sent you here at this moment. It is but another proof that our steps are all numbered."

On his part Carl felt no particular thankfulness for having been found on the spot at that special moment ; but he rebuked the thought as it suggested itself to him.

"I must tell you all," said Miss Waldron, "but to you only. It must be a secret between us two. I would not have my father made uneasy for the world ; and if I need any counsel or protection, you will give me both. I can count upon you, dear Carl."

"Certainly," he replied.

Miss Waldron's narrative contained several details not to be found in the preceding chapter, all tending to cast a lustre on her own conduct, such as might be supposed by an uncharitable spirit to have existed only in her own imagination. She omitted also the mention of Madame's suggestion with respect to Carl himself, though she was tearfully eloquent in connection with her suspicions concerning her brother and Hester being in the habit of seeing one another in the old Frenchwoman's garret. Here Carl possessed a knowledge of which Miss Waldron was ignorant ; and nothing appeared more probable to him than that Robert Waldron had seized upon any opportunity of meeting Hester. But that she should consent to these clandestine interviews was a sure, convincing proof that he had won her affection ; and she had fallen into the snare through dread of her father. Could this be the sorrow which old Mr. Watson had foreseen for Hester ? Had he received some hint of the miserable attachment she had formed ? What could he do in the matter ?

With his darkened face reflected in the little sacred mirror, Carl let these first thoughts run riot in his brain, while Miss Waldron meandered on in a gently purling stream of sentiment, which, to speak the truth, did more credit to her heart than her head, and which murmured idly against Carl's ear as a brook laps unheeded against

the granite base of a rock. He had no notion of what she was saying. He was dethroning the image of Hester from its pure, sweet, girlish supremacy, and setting it beside the image of Robert Waldron. The mere thought of such a union shocked him. He turned away from it with revulsion, as if it were a crime. It flashed suddenly across him that Hester had been intended for him ; he knew it, and felt sure of it. Their spirits were of one kind ; their hearts beat with the same pulse. If she had only waited a little longer before surrendering the treasure of her love ! But she had cast away her pearls, and had no longer any to bestow upon him to whom they would have been wealth beyond price.

Carl suffered more intense pain this morning than he had done the night before while listening to Mr. Waldron. There had been the consolation of doubt then, but there was none now. Hester met Robert clandestinely, and it must be because she loved him.

"I ought not to have been alarmed, even then," said Miss Waldron ; "I ought to have stayed myself upon a promise."

"Certainly," replied Carl, not hearing what she said.

"But I am only a feeble woman," she continued ; "we are not like you and others, with your strong minds. I am afraid you will despise me for the future."

She had never before pleaded her feminine feebleness, but now she looked up to him with an appealing and helpless gaze. From Hester's eyes such a glance would have penetrated the profoundest depths of his heart ; but from Miss Waldron it had no such effect.

"Despise you !" he said ; "oh, no ! why should I ? No doubt you had cause for alarm."

"And you will esteem me, and—care for me as much as ever ?" she asked, with a recurring sob.

"To be sure," he replied ; " why do you trouble yourself afresh, Miss Waldron ? There is no more cause for fear. As soon as you feel yourself equal to the exertion, I will see you safe home."

"Carl," she said, in a bashful and hesitating tone; "if you really feel that we are friends, and especially now we have a secret between us, and I have only you to look to for advice and protection, I wish you would leave off calling me Miss Waldron. You may call me by my name, Sophia."

"But nobody calls you Sophia," exclaimed Carl, with alarmed earnestness.

"But I will allow you to do so," she answered, condescendingly ; "it is less distant, and more friendly. To the rest of the world I remain Miss Waldron ; to you I am Sophia."

Carl murmured his thanks indistinctly. It needed a great effort to save him from a lack of courtesy. But she was a good woman, a member of his Church, a lady, and the daughter of his patron. All these titles gave her so many claims to his respect ; and even if it were true, as Annie had intimated, that she distinguished him with her preference, that was no reason whatever why he should treat her with impoliteness or ill-temper. There was a mingled sense of shame and sorrow for her which lent to his manner a sufficient gentleness to blind Miss Waldron's eyes, already dazzled with self-importance. She intimated that she was now ready to undertake the walk home ; and leaning confidently, but not too heavily, upon his arm, they traversed together the watchful streets of Little Aston and the glades of the park, while unutterable sentiments filled the heart of Sophia Waldron.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

TEN YEARS AFTER.

IT was a noticeable sight, and one fraught with tacit inferences, which had greeted Hester's eyes as she turned the corner of the street and saw Carl and Miss Waldron about to enter the chapel vestry upon a day and hour when there was neither a public service nor a more private meeting of any kind. She had not chosen to recognize them; for the question asked by Annie, whether she had not observed something peculiar in Miss Waldron's manner towards Carl, had been rankling in her mind ever since; and the pain it created there set her on her guard, both against herself and them. She was in a transition state of moods and emotions, of which she could not breathe a word to any one. From the first moment her eyes had looked upon Carl's face, with its fine, clear, happy, and good aspect, so differing in its charm from the handsomer features of Robert Waldron, she had felt that there were other classes of men in the world than those she had met in her narrow sphere. Hitherto she had found no man stronger in nature than herself; for in her heart of hearts Hester knew herself less weak in the presence of trial and temptation than any of the people about her, with the exception, perhaps, of Grant. She was, though Mr. Waldron and Robert did not suspect it, little pliable to outer influences, and not easily moulded into a form foreign to herself. But Carl was stronger than she. She looked up to him from

beneath the long fringe of her brown eye-lashes, mentally acknowledging him her superior. Sunday after Sunday she listened to him critically, and never caught a false tone or an affected one. She found her mind pondering over his thoughts, and confessing her belief in them. She began to feel as if she was his sole listener ; the congregation might be there, but they could not comprehend him as she did.

A very sweet and subtle impression had taken hold of her, that Carl had been more eloquent for her than for any one else in his church. Now and then, when he had allowed his genius a higher flight than ordinary, and had soared far above the heads of his simple flock, his kindled eyes had sought hers and held it in a fascinated gaze, while he elaborated and concluded his thought ; and there had seemed a secret understanding between them, more perfect than that of words. But now Hester discovered that there was a second listener, with whom, perhaps, Carl had a still more intimate and delicate unison ; who might have the privilege of suggesting the themes of his eloquence, and who certainly could converse with him familiarly about his sermons. When Annie had plainly hinted at Miss Waldron's preference for her brother, Hester, yielding to a very natural and feminine feeling of jealousy, had observed that she was a very pious woman. It was all she could say. To her Miss Waldron had ceased to be imposing or clever ; and she never appeared engaging. Hester scarcely cared to put herself into comparison with her on the score of beauty ; and she felt that she was her superior mentally. But in goodness ? In the one thing needful to a good man like Carl, how far she fell behind the acknowledged Saint of the Church at Little Aston !

Hester humiliated herself all that afternoon ; and, in consequence, was not so pleasant a companion to Lawson

as usual. She set vigorously to work to root out the tares from her heart, one of them being her young love for Carl. She made a number of vows, every one difficult of performance. Her busy hands did not pause because of the inward storm; but Lawson saw more than one tear stealing down her cheeks as she smoothed the gold leaf with her delicate fingers. He was himself excited, and could scarcely refrain from telling Hester of the occurrence of the morning. But her cloudy brow, and her mouth set into a firm line of decision and of secret conflict, silenced him. During the last few months she had grown out of the pensive, and almost timid child, into a mistress, who was gentle and gracious in her manner it was true, but who knew her own dignity and upheld it. When she spoke to him this afternoon, her voice was set in a clear but mournful key; and her words were few. Lawson did not dare to tell her how he had encountered Miss Waldron in his mother's room, and had forbidden her ever to intrude there again. He would leave it for Madame to relate in her own way.

At six o'clock Hester descended from the work-room and made tea for her father, still busy with herself. She could not decide whether she would go to the week-night service at chapel, or stay at home to pursue her melancholy task of rooting up the tares. She debated the point until it was almost too late, and then she dressed in a panic, and sped in frantic haste up the dark street. The fine morning had merged into an evening of thick, cold rain, which was falling heavily, and splashed upon the pavement as she hurried along. Scarcely a creature was to be seen. Here and there a resolute worshipper, like herself, was trudging along under a wet umbrella, but she knew that the congregation would be a small one. And then it all at once occurred to her, with a chill colder than the rain, that very probably Carl himself would be absent, as he was not very

well. She stopped at the door to regain her breath, and to listen if she could hear his voice within. Two or three persons passed her ; one of them a poor woman shabbily dressed in a widow's garb, who paused to look inquisitively at her from under her rusty crape veil. Then Hester went in, caught for a moment the full, grave, searching gaze of Carl from his low reading desk, and going on to her accustomed seat, she sank upon her knees, with a strange, almost intolerable, sense of pain.

For once Hester did not hear a word of Carl's sermon, though she caught the sadness and unwonted languor of his voice. As she left the chapel she saw the carriage from Aston Court still waiting at the door, though Mr. and Miss Waldron were already seated in it. She crossed over the street, and hid in the archway of the court opposite, simply to wound herself with the sight of Carl driving away with her rival. While she stood in the rain and the darkness, he would be whirled off in comfort and luxury. Hester felt for the first time how poor she was. Miss Waldron was rich as well as good, and Carl had made a wise choice. The worldly sneer had scarcely risen to her lips when she shrank from it instinctively, and drove the suspicion back to the unworthy regions from whence it had come to assail her. She watched the little congregation dropping away by twos and threes ; and suddenly recalled to mind a childish play of the lost Rose, who had often amused her by watching the creeping sparks die out of a smouldering piece of paper. Why did the memory of Rose return to her now ? Carl was just coming out of chapel, the last of all, and ran through the rain to the carriage, into which he sprang with the freedom and familiarity of one quite at home with those inside. She saw it roll away down the street, and then she prepared to follow, slowly and sorrowfully, through the beating of the storm.

But had Carl been the last to leave the chapel, where a few lamps were still burning, though they were being put out one by one? Hester cast a last look towards it, and saw the poor widow in her shabby mourning, sitting desolately upon one of the steps of the portico. She was in a mood for lingering. She was in a mood, too, for pity and compassion towards any form of suffering. There was also a fine, and very insidious sense of pleasure in the idea of engaging in some good work, while Miss Waldron was wrapped in luxury and enjoyment. She would be, for the moment, beating her on her own ground. Hester recrossed the street. The stranger was crouching upon the lowest step, with the rain driving full upon her. She seemed to have reached this place, and then fallen, for she was lying along the stone in an attitude of complete helplessness. Hester stooped, and laid her hand gently on her shoulder.

"Are you ill?" she asked, in soothing tones. "You must not lie here in the rain. If you tell me where your home is, I will take you there under my umbrella."

To walk through the wet streets with a friendless and poverty-stricken stranger on her arm would be a vast triumph over Miss Waldron in her carriage, with Carl by her side.

The woman shuddered, and shrank from the light touch of Hester's hand, crouching lower and lower upon the ground. She had looked up from under the veil at Hester's face, upon which the lamp still lit in the entrance of the chapel was shining. Then she gave utterance to a sob, a suppressed cry, a moan wrung from the extreme anguish of a suffering spirit. She stretched out her hand towards Hester, but did not touch her, in a momentary gesture which awoke within her a vague alarm.

"Speak to me," cried Hester : "are you ill? What can I do for you?"

As she spoke the last light was extinguished in the chapel, and the outer doors were closed and fastened by some person within. The noise seemed to arouse the stranger. She rose to her feet, but staggered, and fell back against one of the large, square pillars of the portico.

The continued silence and the agitation of this woman gave a shape to Hester's vague suspicions. A quick terror and chill ran through her frame. The darkness which now gathered about them was a welcome veil ; a screen behind which might be acted scenes that must shun the day. The rain also, and the emptiness of the street, seemed to draw closer the curtain which ought to conceal the wretched creature at her side.

"Tell me only who you are," she whispered, in a tone of mingled pity and terror.

"Hester!" moaned the shadow, which she could scarcely distinguish in the dense darkness of the night ; and there was no need for any other word to pass through the faltering lips.

Hester sank down upon the steps, and with blank, bewildered eyes, gazed into the blackness which hemmed them in. The poor lost Rose had come back at last ! The sinful woman whom she had urged Robert Waldron to seek out, and whose mysterious disappearance had been a continual care to her. Her father's wife stood beside her ! She felt her cheeks burn and her veins tingle. Now she had a vision of her sin which she had never had before. For a few minutes her woman's heart,—a heart which had known womanhood but for a little time,—cried out in strong condemnation of the sinner, as well as the sin. She felt that she could not forgive her all at once ; nor speak to her any words except those of a righteous

anger and abhorrence. She knew now that she ought not to have married her father at all, unless she had felt for him such a love as would have lifted her up forever out of reach of the temptation by which she had fallen.

Yet, thought Hester, after the first paroxysm was over, had not God brought them together thus, on the very threshold of His own house of prayer, to teach her that if He did not cast her out, neither ought she, who might herself be tempted, and who was not without sin? She bowed her head upon her hands, and a passionate prayer went up from her burdened heart for help and wisdom in this hour of extreme need.

"What am I to do with you?" she asked, speaking at last to the silent and motionless figure at her side,—standing there like a voiceless ghost from some other world, which could utter no word until a question was put to it.

"Oh Hester!" she cried, "I could live no longer without seeing you and my home. You cannot think what it is to be away ten years, and never hear a word, not a syllable, of those who belong to you. Would my husband forgive me, do you think? Only so far as to let me hear him say so before I die? I cannot live very long. Is he less angry with me? Does he ever speak of me?"

"No," said Hester, "he has not forgiven you. He never mentions your name."

"Oh, my God!" wailed the lost woman; "but I must get his forgiveness before I die. What is to become of me? I want to hide somewhere; anywhere out of Robert's reach. He is trying to find me; and I vowed to God when I left him that I would never, never look upon his face again. Do you know why? God keep you ever from a repentance like mine. Shelter me somewhere, little Hetty; hide me. You promised once that you would be always like my own daughter to me. Hester, you could

not turn away from your mother, however sinful she had been."

The doleful words were wailed into Hester's ear, as she still gazed into the darkness. Rose had crept towards her, and stolen her arms round her waist. She did not push away the clinging arms, but she could not answer.

"I am very young still," murmured Rose; "no older than Miss Waldron, who was at chapel just now. I thought your father would be there, and I should see how changed he was. I am going to die, Hester. Yesterday the doctor in London said there was no hope for me; so I resolved to come back home, to you and my husband. He is a just man, and a merciful man. He cannot help but forgive me before I die. I believe that Jesus has pardoned all my sins."

In the voice of Rose, which was one to be remembered for a lifetime, there was a tone of hope as she spoke the last sentence, and she pressed her arms more closely about Hester.

"Yes," she said, "I was very wretched, and I thought, when I did not see your father to-night, had I not better go back to London, and end my life quickly as women like me do. But then the preacher spoke, and a strange, strange peace entered into me. He looked towards me, where I sat behind you, Hetty, and he said, 'Our souls have no sins which the charity of Christ cannot cover.' Then I resolved to trust myself to the charity of Christ, and to yours, little Hetty."

Her voice was lost in sobs, long-drawn and painful, and her head sank upon Hester's lap. Hester's hand fell softly, with its cold touch, upon the fevered forehead.

"If Christ will receive you," she said, with a thrill of awe as she looked up into the dark sky, as though she half expected to see a light from heaven breaking through the

black clouds, "who am I that I should cast you off? I will give you shelter for this night at least."

Yet she did not move, nor help Rose to rise, but let her still lie there sobbing, with her face, which no eye could have seen, buried in her lap, as if she would fair hide it even from the night. Hester was thinking of Robert Waldron, in his luxurious home, repenting with a comfortable penitence, which left him free for many pleasures and which was scarcely more than a welcome gloom, where he could withdraw when the brightness of his life wearied him. But this misery, this poverty-stricken, ill-clad, friendless, dying misery, was the true result of the sin of which both had been alike guilty. She shuddered, and Rose felt it; for she loosed her clinging arms, and would have fallen lower at her feet, had not Hester's hand pressed her head down gently upon its resting-place, as a mother's hand caresses the bowed head of a sorrowful child. She had forgotten the cold and the rain, or felt them only as fitting better this dreary hour than light and cloudless skies would have done. But now her hand fell upon the wet clothes of the woman whom she had promised to shelter, a woman upon whom the doom of death had been passed. She lifted Rose up tenderly, and drew her trembling arm through her own. No eye saw them. Not one of their towns-people met them in the deserted street. In the darkness and dreariness of a winter's night, Rose Morley returned to her husband's house.

CHAPTER XL.

HER HUSBAND'S HEARTH.

THERE was on the left hand of the house door an empty room which was rarely entered, and Hester left Rose there until her father and the young girl whom she kept as her only servant should be gone to bed. It was already near the hour when John Morley retired to his own chamber, where he sometimes read or wrote until later on in the night. Hester took off her wet cloak, and went into the room where he was sitting alone. There was a newly-quickened love mingled with a dread of him, stirring in her heart. The grey, despairing face, and the silvery hair of her father touched her to the quick this evening. She stood behind him for a minute or two, and then laid her hand, which had so lately rested upon Rose's forehead, upon the snow-white head. It was the very attitude and caress of Rose herself on that day, now many years ago, which had never died out of John Morley's memory ; and he laid his head down upon the desk before him with a sigh of profound regret and despair.

"Father," cried Hester, earnestly, and kneeling down beside him, "is there nothing that can make you happy? Is there nothing that could happen to bring you comfort?"

John Morley shook his head in silence.

"But this is horrible," she said. "Surely, surely God never meant you to pass your life in a grief like this. Surely He has kept some consolation in His hands for you."

"All things are possible with Him," he answered; "but yet holier men than I have passed through long lives under blacker clouds than mine. There was Cowper. God has not smitten me with an Egyptian gloom like his. For me there is a hope in the world to come, where the weary are at rest."

"But is there no hope for you sooner?" asked Hester. "Is there nothing which would make you glad?"

"Nothing!" he replied. "I have a habit of sorrow now, Hester, and I cannot shake it off. It is a poisoned garment, if you will, but to tear it off would tear my living flesh. No, no! There is no more gladness for me in life."

Could she tell to him her heavy secret? An unutterable terror seized upon her at the very thought. She remembered the moment when her father, with the glare of madness and suicide in his eyes, had awakened her from the profound sleep of childhood, telling her it was better to die than to live. She recollected the stealthy, murderous blow which had nearly killed Robert Waldron. Her heart failed her. Overhead was that closed room, which had been a constant testimony against Rose; and now Hester involuntarily held her breath and listened as if she heard some sound there. John Morley listened also; but there was nothing to be heard, as there never had been since Rose had fled. He sighed wearily, and turned over the leaves of the book without reading them. The striking of the house-clock seemed welcome to him; and he bade Hester good night, and left her alone in the gloomy room.

Hester waited until she heard him lock his chamber door, and then she fetched Rose to the warmth of the fire still burning in the grate. In the dark room Rose had not realized that she was indeed once more in her husband's house. But this was his hearth. Here was his chair standing where it had been used to stand in her days of in-

innocence, gone forever. There was his open book, with the leaves still fluttering as if they felt the movement of his fingers. This was the light he had been reading by, and the air he had breathed. It was her husband's hearth, and she had been a curse to it. She was come back to it in secret, and with trembling. She felt now how impossible it would be to face him, to look into his eyes, and to hear his voice. She glanced about her for some refuge to hide herself in—herself, a scared, abject, frightened wretch, who ought to steal away into some hole to die alone and unseen. Her wild despairing gaze round her husband's room met the sweet, grave compassionate eyes of Hester.

"Sit here, poor mother," she said, drawing nearer the fire her own mother's chair, which in the lost days Rose had always given up for her little step-daughter. She sank down upon it, her lips moving without a sound, and her white face turned towards Hester. Hester had not seen it before. It was the same face as that of the gay girl she had once been; but that face disfigured and marred and aged by shame. The soft lines were hardened, and the brightness had grown dim, and the freshness had become sullied and tarnished. Hester could not bear to look at it; and as she moved to and fro, ministering to her sore necessities, she did so with averted and downcast eyes.

The hours of the night wore away very slowly. Some times Rose fell into a feverish slumber, broken with sobs and starts. She would not go to bed, and Hester did not urge it. What she was to do with her, Hester did not know; and while she watched her uneasy rest, she tried to shape out some plan for her future life. To seek any home for her in Little Aston would be madness, as every one would know her and the story of her shame. To send her away, whom she had so earnestly and so long sought to find, seemed impossible, ten times impossible, if, as she said,

there was no hope of her life. It would be practicable enough to keep her in her father's house, for John Morley's automatic habits could be counted upon to a moment. There were rooms in his house which he had never entered within her memory, and which he would never think of visiting. The cost of her maintenance there would be less than anywhere else, and money was very scarce with them. But she recoiled from the idea of suffering her to dwell by stealth and unforgiven in her husband's house, to sleep under the same roof. Hester recalled her father's melancholy cry, "She will never sleep under my roof again." Moreover, now she guessed somewhat more clearly the heinousness of Rose's guilt. She could not keep her unknown to her father, in the shelter of his dishonored home.

From time to time Rose woke up and murmured little scraps of her sad history. She had taken no special care to conceal the traces of her flight, yet it had happened so that she had left Falaise and wandered into a remote country district, where she had lived cheaply, as one can do in France, for some years upon the money which was in her possession. When it was gone she had entered into a situation as lady's-maid, and so returned with the family to England, three years ago. She had always passed as a widow. Her last situation she had given up only two months before; and since then she had been living in poor and solitary lodgings in London, with no society but the memory of the past; which had grown day by day into stronger force, until it had driven her back to Little Aston in the forlorn hope of casting herself upon her husband's forgiveness. Hester shook her head sadly at these last words. There was no chance, whatever, that John Morley would forgive her.

"You do not yet know what you have done," she said, with unconscious severity. "If you could see him you would know better what he has to forgive. He may for-

give you before you die. But I dare not tell him that you are here ; I dare not mention your name to him."

"But it is so many years ago !" cried Rose, clasping her thin hands together.

"Many years ago !" echoed Hester ; "no ; it has been every day of those ten years. The grief has been new every morning. Ah ! I understand it better now. Every day he has felt himself deserted and betrayed. Oh, my father ! my poor father !"

She covered her face with her hands as if she could no longer endure the sight of her who had wrought her father's misery. But a slight sound caused her to look up. Rose was wrapping round her the shabby cloak, still damp and soiled from the rain of the evening. Her wan face was flushed, and her eyes, burning with inward fever, had lost their former distress.

"I am going away," she said, "and I will not come back till I crawl here dying. I must see him again, and hear him say he forgives me ; and if he sees me dying at his feet, he will say it. But I will go away for a little while, Hetty."

"But where will you go ?" asked Hester.

"Oh, I don't know," she cried, wringing her hands ; "why does God let women as wretched and lonely as me live ? I could never put an end to myself, for I'm afraid to die. And now I shall go away, and it will come creeping on and on, and I shall know it is there, and there will not be a voice to speak gently to me. Oh ! little Hetty, cannot you help me ?"

"Yes," answered Hester, taking her bonnet and cloak from her feeble hands ; "I will help you. If my father ever heard you had been ill in misery and solitude, it would only add to his pain. You must stay somewhere near to me, poor mother, so that I can nurse you and comfort

you. Think of God rather than of my father. You have separated yourself from him, but you have not separated yourself forever from God. You belong to Him still."

In tones as soft and soothing as those a mother uses to a suffering child, Hester spoke these words to Rose. She placed the poor forlorn creature in her mother's chair again, and smoothed gently the locks of light hair, now thin and grey, which had fallen in disorder over her face. Rose slumbered again fitfully, crying out in her dreams for her husband's forgiveness. Once or twice Hester started with terror, thinking she heard his step upon the stairs; but the dreary night wore away without surprise. As soon as the late dawn began to glimmer upon the uncurtained window, she awoke Rose and took her up stairs to her own room, where she would be safe from all eyes.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE OLD NURSERY.

IT was as Hester drew up the window-blind in her own room, and her eye fell upon the melancholy-looking outbuilding opposite it, that a practicable plan for the shelter of Rose presented itself to her. The old nursery, which at some remote date in the past had perhaps been the scene of childish sports and laughter, would be a refuge well fitted for her safety and concealment. Still she resolved within herself to ask her father's consent, though her habitual independence of action might very well have acquitted her conscience from the necessity of seeking it. She wished to feel that she had his sanction. She thought that at some future season it would prove a consolation to him to know that he had himself given a refuge and shelter to Rose.

At breakfast, with lowered eyelids and a voice which betrayed her intense anxiety, she made her request to John Morley.

"I met a poor woman last night at chapel," she said, "a stranger in the town, without friends. She has been a lady's maid for some years, but she is now in great destitution. She thinks of getting her living by needlework, but she can scarcely do more than earn bread by that. I wish we could help her, father."

"It is very little that we can do," he said, mournfully.

"Yes, we can do a great deal, she answered; "what she dreads most is associating with drunken and ignorant poor people. I don't think poverty is so bad in itself; but it is bad when you are compelled to live among low people. I don't mind being poor in the least, while we are together, father."

"What can we do for her then, Hester?" asked John Morley.

"There is the old nursery in the yard," she said, with a feeling of desperate resolve, "it is only filled with rubbish now, but there is a good grate in it, and the roof is whole. If a few panes were put into the window, and I found some old furniture for it, it would be quite a home for the poor creature. We might even ask a small rent for it, if you thought that was best."

"Hester!" ejaculated her father, in a tone of reproach.

"Then I may do it," she answered, eagerly; "oh! you will never repent it, dear father. You do not know what good may come of it. She will never come into your way, poor thing! You will never see her, I am sure; for she is afraid of being seen. She has been very unhappy in her marriage, and she is afraid of ever meeting her husband again. No, you will never see her."

Hester was speaking to herself rather than to him, in a manner which might well have excited his suspicions. But John Morley saw nothing of her agitation; he was plunged into more personal and more perplexing contemplations.

"Hester," he said, "I am in sore need of money. We must raise near upon £200 before the beginning of next week. I have some heavy bills to meet."

For some years past John Morley's method of conducting his business had been by drawing bills, which always came due so long before he had the money to meet them. Hester had been very early initiated into these anxieties.

"How can we do it?" she asked, with some natural disquietude at the mention of a sum so large.

"There is but one way that I can see," he answered; "we must mortgage the house. Yet it is the only property I could leave to you if I died; and it came to me with your mother. Everything has gone wrong with me since I lost her. I would not do anything with it without your consent, Hester."

"Don't think of me, father," she said, "and don't trouble about me. If that is the only thing we can do, let us do it at once. Who would lend us the money upon the house?"

"I don't know," he replied, with a helpless shake of the head.

"Father," she continued, with a beating heart, "I know who would do it, and it might be kept a secret, so that all the town may not talk about it. Will you let me tell the person I am thinking of?"

"Who is it?" he asked, in a low voice.

"Mr. Waldron," answered Hester.

"Mr. Waldron!" he repeated; "I could not receive any favor from him. It would be like taking money for my—Oh, Hester! life is very hard."

She understood his half-uttered sentence perfectly; and her heart ached for him and the broken-spirited, desolate woman hidden away from his sight.

"It would be no favor," she said earnestly; "we should pay the interest of the money, or he should have the house. You should not see him yourself, but I will in your place. You could write to him, you know, and I will take your letter, and explain everything to him. He would not think he was doing you any favor; I will take care of that. Then nobody would know except ourselves and him."

"I cannot make out how the business has fallen away so much," sighed John Morley.

Any one seeing his melancholy and abstracted face, and hearing the mournful tones of his voice, would very easily have understood why customers were few and their visits brief in John Morley's shop. No one chooses to do his shopping where he meets with a face and voice adapted to a house of mourning. Hester understood it better than her father, but she could not make it plain to him. She knew, too, that he tacitly agreed to her plan, and she said no more about it. For the rest of the day she was busy over the more pressing duty of getting Rose's refuge ready before night-fall. When it was over, she lit a fire in the grate, so long empty and cold. The nursery looked but a poor place after all her care. The walls were discolored and stained, and the rafters of the sloping roof were black with age. There was a little bed in one corner, with the softest mattress and pillows off Hester's own bedstead. Two chairs stood one on each side of the narrow fire-place, with a small round table between them. It all looked bare, dingy, and forlorn. In the solitude of her long lonely hours, the occupant of this room would have time for repentance; but there seemed no place for atonement and reparation. What could she do in this poor refuge and hiding-place? In the dusk of the evening Hester led her stepmother to the only home she could provide for her. Rose stood motionless in the centre of the little room, looking about it with searching and troubled eyes.

"It is the best I can do," said Hester anxiously, "we are very poor."

"Poor!" echoed Rose.

She said no more, and her face grew paler and more troubled; but afterwards there rested upon her worn features an expression of solemnity amounting almost to

dignity, such as had never been seen upon them in her bright girlish days.

“God bless you, Hetty,” she cried ; “you are better than a daughter to me. This is the place where I am to die, seeing you to the last ; and your father. He cannot be relentless, when you are so good. Oh ! my darling, my darling ! you are like an angel from heaven to me.”

She flung herself on her knees and threw her arms around Hester, with tears of profound anguish, and sobs such as might be wrung from tortured lips.

When Hester quitted the old nursery, Rose waited for some minutes without stirring, in the attitude of one who listens eagerly. Then very cautiously she stole to the door and opened it a little way to look out into the yard. The house opposite seemed to tower above her very high and very black in the darkness, with one window lighted up in the highest story of the gable to the right, and another on the ground floor of the gable to the left. She knew their meaning well. Lawson was still at work in his attic, and her husband was sitting in his old place with his books about him. She could remember him so well ; the thick brown hair just catching a tinge of silver, and the studious handsome face which had been wont to brighten with a smile as sudden as a flash of lightning when he met her eye—a rare smile, reserved exclusively for her. She wondered to herself whether he had ever smiled so upon his daughter. Since she had seen Hester, she had felt a little more comforted about her husband, and a little less remorseful. He had not been so deserted or so lonely as she had pictured to herself. He had watched his child growing up at his side. There came a pang, an unreasonable pang amounting almost to jealousy, at the thought that he had grown forgetful of her and her sin in the companionship of Hester. In the brief space of her married life she had

fostered a profound jealousy of Hester's mother. And now, as she looked down into the yard towards the lighted window behind which he was sitting, an unconquerable longing seized her to steal down the crazy staircase, and in amongst the blackened stems of the lilacs and the dwarfed laburnums, to look once more upon her husband whose love she had bartered for the boyish passion of Robert Waldron.

She listened again, but there was no movement, no sign of life in the yard below. On the other side of the house lay the street and the busy world of which she had taken her last farewell. For to venture out into these streets and to show her familiar face among the townspeople would be to banish herself forever from the home where she had come to die. Was she positively come to die here? Was she never more to sleep on any other bed but this until she fell into the last awful unbroken sleep? Were these walls and this narrow court the only spot of the wide world on which her eyes were ever to look again? She stretched out her arms and raised her bent figure to its fullest height. She felt no pain, nothing but the feebleness, often worse than pain, which is the result of long mental suffering. The London physician had perhaps been deceived by her symptoms, which, possibly, she had exaggerated to him. She might live many years yet. But to live—what was that? To die was dreadful; but she could not choose to live. She tried to send back her thoughts to the time when she fancied she had loved another better than her husband; but it was in vain. The thought of John Morley was there quick and poignant in her inmost soul; but Robert Waldron was forgotten. She must see her husband.

Still she lingered and listened, watching the gleam through the uncurtained window, and the black naked boughs of the trees standing out clearly against its feeble light. She

turned back and looked at her own faded face in a small glass which hung against the wall, over a little toilet-table. If her husband could only see it and read in it the story of her bitter repentance, would he not forgive her? But how much would his forgiveness mean? Was it possible that he could be reconciled to her? That he could receive her again? Call her his wife, and restore her to her forfeited place? No, no; that could never be. He might look upon her again, and pardon her if she was in the hour of death. But if life were strong within her, and many years lay before her, would he not spurn her from him, and refuse to lay his finger to her burden of shame?

At length she hurried down the steps and into the dreary little garden. She crept stealthily towards the window, lest she should enter into the revealing light, and her husband should lift up his eyes and see her standing without in the chill of the wintry night. Her face, wan, faded, and withered, approached cautiously the uncurtained panes. The room—she had seen that last night, with its ten years of added dinginess and decay. But who was this aged man, with a head bowed and white with years, who was bending over her husband's desk, and turning, from time to time, anxiously to the great account-books she had hated years ago. Her husband could not yet be fifty years old, a man in the full vigor and strength of life. The lamp beside him was covered with a shade which cast a gloom over the rest of the room, while it threw a full light upon him. The thin, shrivelled hands, the rounded shoulders, the grey and hollow features, the white hair—Rose saw them as in a dream. He got up at last, pushing away his books, and took his stand upon the hearth, with his back to the fire and his full face turned towards her. She drew back with a creeping thrill of terror.

"Hester," she heard him say, "I have finished my letter

to Mr. Waldron. But if it were not for your sake, I would sooner let things take their course than ask him to lend me money. Ay, I would sooner die!"

Rose waited to hear no more. She cast one terrified glance at her husband, and then she fled back in a panic of fear to her hiding-place.

"Oh! what have I done?" she cried, in a frightened whisper, speaking as if some one was near enough to hear her; "he was a good man, and a prosperous man! I did not know what I should do. God forgive me! He never will; but God, in His great mercy, forgive me!"

She counted no more upon her husband's forgiveness. What there was in his face she did not know, but it had cast out all hope from her heart. For the first time, looking into the deep gulf of her husband's wrongs, she knew that it must be forever fixed between her and him. Perhaps in the last hour he might lay his hand in hers, and let her feel its warm forgiving clasp, as she went down into the dark valley of separation. But only in that supreme moment of death. Life, if she lived, must be a **perpetual banishment** from his presence.

CHAPTER XLII.

A LESSON FOR HESTER.

THE next morning, Hester, with her father's letter in her hand, wended her way slowly across the park to Aston Court. She felt a natural reluctance to the merest chance of meeting Robert Waldron, towards whom her feelings had undergone a great revulsion. Until now he had claimed from her an undefined and rather pleasant pity, mingled with admiration. If Carl had not come into her narrow world, her sentiment for Robert would have bordered upon a girl's first love for a seeming hero ; and her heart, free and tender, might have centred in him its interests, and possibly its affections. But with Rose at home, with this dark sad shadow at her side, she recoiled from the idea of seeing him again for the first time. To her infinite relief she just caught a glimpse of him leaving the park on horseback by another route. Mr. Waldron then would be alone, and she could ask him not to let his son know of the transaction. She quickened her steps, and took the nearest way to the room where he was generally to be found in the morning. It led past the window of the breakfast-room, where Hester saw a vision of Miss Waldron sitting near the fire, and Carl in close conversation with her. She nodded to Carl, whose face was turned towards the window, and hurried on. Mr. Waldron was at that moment walking along the farthest end of the terrace, and Hester started to run after him. The

color which this exercise brought to her pale cheeks gave her the beauty she lacked ; and as Mr. Waldron turned sharply round, he acknowledged to himself that Robert's love had sufficient excuse. To Hester's extreme astonishment, he drew her into his arms, and imprinted a solemn kiss upon her glowing face. She had not the faintest idea that he was saluting her for the first time as the daughter of whom he had fondly dreamed these last two years.

"My dear," he said, drawing her hand upon his arm, and covering it with his own, "I was just thinking of you. You are often in my thoughts, Hester,—how often you would be surprised to know."

No opening could be more propitious. In a few incoherent sentences Hester stammered out the purpose of her visit, as she walked down the terrace, leaning upon his arm. He opened the folding doors of his room, and led her into it, seating her in a chair close to his own, and regarding with delight her downcast face, and her long eyelashes now beaded with tears. Nothing could have pleased him more ; no overture could have come more opportunely. At the very moment when he was planning some mode of approach to John Morley, he had himself sent Hester to ask his help.

"Hester," he said, "your father has given me the greatest pleasure I have known for a long while. I am right glad he did not go to anybody else. What ! are we not brothers ? Have we not been members of the same Church these thirty years ? He has acted like a Christian in coming to me. I will return at once with you to your home. This is the right thing. I find great pleasure in this."

He rubbed his hands heartily, looking down upon Hester with a smile of approbation. Already he was

thinking of what house would be near enough to Aston Court, where he could bask a little in the freedom and gentleness of her presence whenever he grew slightly weary, as he did sometimes, of his daughter's piety.

"I was very much afraid of coming," said Hester, with a sigh of relief, and raising her eyes to his with a smile that enchanted him. His daughter-in-law promised fair to become his idol.

"Afraid of me!" he repeated, his austere face beaming with pleasure; "whatever could make the poor child afraid of me? Am I so very terrible to you, Hester?"

"Oh, no!" she said; "but you are the greatest man I ever have to speak to; and I don't know anybody else who would have been bold enough to come to you as I have."

"Bold!" cried Mr. Waldron; "she calls herself bold! And asks simply for two hundred pounds! I wish it was two thousand, and you should have it at once. Come, let us go to your father, and set this business to rights. But as for a mortgage on his house, that is all nonsense."

"We must not go to him, said Hester, earnestly; "and he will never consent to take any money from you except upon a mortgage, for which he will pay interest. I know my father, and he will not listen to any other proposal. He would put his affairs into some lawyer's hands immediately."

"But what then does he want me to do?" asked Mr. Waldron, disappointed.

"He has written to you," she answered, "and given a fair statement of his debts. What I want is to ask you to advance any sum of money you think will bring us through our difficulties; though I am sure I don't see how they can end."

She spoke very dejectedly, and Mr. Waldron longed to tell her what a brilliant lot lay at her feet for her accept-

ance. But he dared not do it yet. He opened John Morley's letter, and read it carefully, seeing from it far more clearly than the writer how complicated his embarrassments were. He determined to avail himself of the new confidence established between him and Hester, in order to advance the happiness of his son.

"I must deliberate over this," he said, "and I shall want you to come up again several times, I dare say. You may take the money home with you at once; but still there will be papers to draw up, and I should like to know more about your affairs, as far as your father chooses to confide them to me. You will not dislike coming several times?"

"Oh! I shall like it," she said frankly; "I would spare my father any trouble that I could bear for him."

There was a fond and truthful devotion in Hester's manner which penetrated to Mr. Waldron's heart; and a treacherous doubt crossed it as to whether his daughter was really as devoted to him.

"And you are very poor, Hester?" he said.

"Very poor," she answered, gravely.

"You would like to be rich?" he asked.

"Dearly," she answered; "I should like to be as rich as you are, Mr. Waldron. I like a house as large and grand as this, and I think I could spend my money like any lady in the land."

"Like any other lady," he corrected.

"No," she said, "I am no lady. I belong quite to the working-class."

If she belonged to the working-classes, Mr. Waldron wished that all the other ladies of his acquaintance, including his daughter, did the same. When the interview came to an end, he insisted upon taking her to see Miss Waldron, and himself conducted her to the breakfast-room, where she still was, though she was alone, Carl having

taken his departure. Hester was not sorry to see Miss Waldron, as a new interest centred in her, now that she had to regard her as Carl's possible future wife. She was received with a distant condescension intended to keep her in her place, which Miss Waldron was afraid of her forgetting, since she had been invited to dinner at Aston Court. More than this, there was rankling in her mind a suspicion almost amounting to conviction about Robert's meetings with her in Madame Lawson's garret, in spite of that old lady's denials. Her father also seemed disposed to make too much of John Morley's daughter. It was one of the greatest disadvantages of their denomination that social distinctions were apt to be overlooked among the members of a Church. Both Mr. Waldron and Hester seemed to ignore them ; and it was high time to set her down a little. At the bottom of all lay a terrible doubt of Carl, who did not go on exactly as she wished, and who had never once set her heart beating by calling her Sophia.

"I am very much occupied with a bazaar," she said, after a freezing salutation ; "and I have no doubt you can assist me in the plainer work. I will give you some to take home with you."

"I am afraid I shall have no time," she answered : "though, indeed, I thought of asking you if you could not find me some sewing to do at home. I mean for payment. I shall want a little money soon, and I cannot ask my father for any."

Her thoughts were running on the fresh burden she had added to the charge of their household expenditure. Rose would have all her time unoccupied ; and Hester knew well how pacifying it is to a woman's spirit to have woman's work in her fingers. Besides, so far as her strength would permit, it would be only right for Rose to do something

towards earning her own living. Hester had grown up in the practical school of poverty ; so she asked Miss Waldron for work, and the payment for it, quite naturally, and with no over-weening sentimental emotion.

"I intend to ask Mrs. Grant as well," she continued ; "but I am afraid she will not have much to give me, as she has all her wedding clothes still unworn. But perhaps she will know of somebody else. I shall want a constant supply," she added reflectively, "and it will be beautifully done."

To Miss Waldron an acknowledgment and request like these were a confession of immeasurable inferiority. She almost wondered to see Hester comfortably seated in her presence ; and she cast a cold supercilious eye upon her dress, which was plain and worn, but, in some manner, in perfect keeping with the sweet face of the wearer. She answered in a tone of stiff patronage, which marked the vast distance between them.

"I will see what I can do to assist you, Hester Morley," she said ; "I have no doubt this is sent for your good, to humble you and prove you. I trust you are profiting by this discipline."

"I hope I am," she replied, simply. "I should be very miserable indeed if I did not believe that God sent all my troubles to do me good in the end. As to being poor, I dare not murmur at that, for Christ was poorer than I am."

Miss Waldron held her peace for a moment, and felt disquieted. If poverty were no inferiority, what advantage had she over Hester ?

"You are only a child yet," she said, after a brief pause ; "you are but a babe in spiritual things, and must still be fed with milk."

"Do you consider poverty milk for babes ?" asked Hester, with a smile.

"I cannot jest upon solemn subjects," answered Miss

Waldron, sternly ; “ but I will see what I can do to assist you, and I will send you a parcel by one of the servants to-morrow. You must excuse me now, for I am very busily engaged.”

Thus dismissed, Hester took her leave. Miss Waldron felt happier and more reassured. She had not quite known the extent of John Morley's poverty ; but now it had assumed a magnitude sufficient to form an insurmountable barrier between Carl and Hester. Very few young pastors, without private means, could afford the luxury of a portionless wife. But it was quite necessary to make Hester feel her position, for there had been a freedom in her manner which, more than ever, grated upon Miss Waldron's dignity now. She retired to her dressing-room, and ordered her maid to bring out the summer dresses which she had cast off, with sundry articles no longer suitable for her own wear. The selection she made was not such as to excite the silent resentment and envy of her attendant. They would convey, she thought, a valuable lesson to Hester. To do her justice, she was not in the least aware of the full measure of her impertinence ; for, to her, Hester was still only a young girl, and the daughter of one of their tradespeople who had solicited her for work. But she was quite willing to humble her and bring down her pride. Having completed her selection, she ordered her maid to make them up into a parcel and to convey them to Miss Morley the next time the carriage drove into Little Aston.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A MUNIFICENT GIFT.

UNFORTUNATELY for Miss Waldron, it happened that when the Aston Court coachman handed her parcel out to Hester's little servant, who carried it up stairs to her small sitting-room, Annie Grant was there, eagerly discussing with Hester how she could find some suitable work for her. They opened Miss Waldron's packet at once, and regarded its contents with astonished and incredulous eyes. Instead of the sewing they expected, they found, first, an old brown terry-velvet bonnet, of a fashion which had prevailed several years before ; below that a soiled and tumbled dress of some thin material, and a white muslin pelerine which had been a good deal mended. In addition to this munificent gift there were several scraps of ribbons, some very large old collars, an odd flower or two, and a pair of black silk mittens. A note accompanied them, expressing Miss Waldron's hope that Hester Morley would find these articles of clothing useful to her.

Annie Grant possessed sufficient penetration, and had seen enough of Miss Waldron, not to accord to her quite as unhesitating an admiration as the general public of Little Aston. She was of a quick, fiery disposition, and not at all disposed to submit tamely, either for herself or others, to the insolence or assumption of any one. When she

saw the tears start to Hester's eyes, and her lips tremble with words she would not speak, her own indignation broke out.

"Never!" she exclaimed; "I never saw or heard or dreamed of such a thing in my whole life! What does the woman mean? How dare she do such a thing? Hester, what is the meaning of it?"

"I asked her for some sewing," said Hester, her lips quivering still, "and she has sent me this."

"Oh!" cried Annie, "I only wish she had brought them herself. I wonder how she could venture to do such a thing! But she counted upon you never telling anybody else; upon no one hearing of it."

"I never should," said Hester.

"I am glad I was here," continued Annie; "very glad! I only wish her father and brother knew! Marry Carl, indeed! No, not if she had ten times her money: the mean, insolent, purse-proud creature! Hester, you shall give them to me. It would only aggravate you to keep them in your own sight. Let your girl carry them up to our house at once."

"Don't you think we had better keep it a secret?" asked Hester.

"Keep it a secret!" responded Annie; "I could not keep it. James will know, and Carl. I should like him to hear what his grand friend has done. I shall take them away with me; they don't belong to you, for I suppose you won't keep them as a gift. Just look at them, Hester."

She turned over the things strewed upon the table, with gestures and exclamations of indignant excitement. The insult rankled in her mind the more for the outward composure of Hester's manner. She wished to hear her speak with some of her own vehement resentment; but she was

quiet, wounded to the quick, perhaps, but so silent that Annie could not rouse her to utter any words of reproach.

Very shortly Annie went home, followed by the servant bearing Miss Waldron's parcel. She was burning for some opportunity of making manifest her anger to the author of it, and she possessed too little worldly prudence to conceal it upon any ground of expediency. Carl was not at home, nor her husband. She carried the parcel into her own room, and contemplated the contents afresh. An excellent thought struck her, and she immediately resolved to put it into execution.

Without a moment's pause for consideration, Annie arrayed herself in the cast-off finery which Miss Waldron had selected for conveying a useful lesson to Hester. She put on the shabby and crumpled dress, too short for her, and in consequence, much too short for Hester, who was taller than either of them. Over that she threw the yellow and darned muslin tippet, with one of the largest collars, which reached to the tip of her shoulders; and she fastened to it the scraps of old ribbon and the odd flowers. Upon her head she placed the long poked bonnet, which almost concealed her face; and then she drew upon her hands the lace mittens. A more singular apparition than her own reflection in her glass had never met her eyes, and she burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter at the sight of it. The distance between their own house and the park-gates was but short, and she was about to make a call upon Miss Waldron. If either Mr. Waldron or Robert should happen to be present, she would say nothing, and leave Miss Waldron to explain as she could the remarkable figure she presented; but if she should be alone—why then—

Annie sped along quickly towards Aston Court, escaping all observation till she came to the park-gates. Once

within them she considered herself safe, and she could walk more quietly. What would she say to Miss Waldron if she found her alone? Annie did not feel as if she should be at any loss for words ; but then what would be the end of it? Very likely Miss Waldron for her own sake would keep the secret, but there could never be any cordiality or friendliness between them again. Not that she shrank from this mode of revenge in the least. She could not help laughing out aloud as she imagined Miss Waldron's consternation and chagrin upon recognizing her valuable gift to Hester coming up to view again in so unexpected a manner. Would it not be best to say nothing at all, and leave her dress silently to rebuke and confound the impertinence of the giver? It was possible that it would be the most effectual and the most pardonable mode of reproof.

Her mind was busily discussing the subject, when she saw, not very far off, her husband and Robert Waldron coming to meet her. There was neither time nor a way for retreat. Grant catching sight of a singular person coming towards him with a figure and carriage like his wife, arrested his progress for a moment, with an exclamation of doubt and surprise. Robert Waldron, whose sight was longer and keener than his, recognized Annie perfectly.

"It is Mrs. Grant," he said, quickening his steps.

"But what is the matter with her?" asked Grant ; "she does not look like herself."

She was so unlike herself, that, as she came nearer, Robert could scarcely restrain the ejaculation of surprise which rose to his lips. Grant did not attempt to restrain his.

"Annie!" he exclaimed, "is it really you? Where are you going to? What in the world has happened to you?"

"I am going to call upon Miss Waldron," she answered, with an hysterical laugh. For an instant a wild doubt

crossed her husband's mind as to whether she had not lost possession of her reason ; and he looked steadily into her excited face.

"Annie," he said, "what is the matter?"

This simple question was put by him so gravely, that Annie was more and more hysterically affected. He drew her arm into his own, and led the way towards the lodge.

"We had better go in," he said to Robert ; "we can get water for her there, and the lodge-keeper will leave us her room for a few minutes."

Before long, Annie had recovered her composure, and sat, feeling very much subdued, on the settle in the lodge, while her husband and Robert Waldron waited for her complete recovery. She was crying now, but a word might send her off into laughter again ; and she wiped away her tears, and drank little sips of water from the glass her husband held to her lips. Robert could not determine to go while the mystery of her conduct remained unsolved ; for his eye recognized some of the shabby finery she wore as having once belonged to his sister and he felt that he must learn the meaning of it.

"I was going to see Miss Waldron," repeated Annie at last, as soon as she could command her voice.

"But in these rags !" said Grant ; "my dear Annie, do control yourself, and satisfy me that you are in a sound mind."

Annie hesitated, and looked towards Robert, but he would not go away.

"These rags," he said, adopting Grant's word, "once belonged to my sister, I am sure ; and there is some mystery belonging to them. Dear Mrs. Grant, I beg of you to let me hear the explanation."

"You will never believe me," cried Annie, all her in

dignation reviving; "but she positively sent these old things this morning as a gift to—guess who to?"

"Not to you," said Grant, with an unpleasant smile.

"No, not to me, but to Hester Morley," she answered.

"Hester Morley!" echoed Grant, while Robert's face grew dark as he waited for Annie's answer.

"I was there when they came," she said, "with a note from Miss Waldron, hoping Hester could make use of them. Just look at them. Look at this bonnet."

She took it off her head and held it at arm's length, laughing and catching her breath in sobs at the same moment. Robert snatched it from her, and crushed it out of all shape under his foot.

"Hester!" he said; "good heavens! I can scarcely believe what you say. Why, Hester is to be my wife, if I can win her by any means; and you tell me these things were sent to her by my sister!"

"Your wife!" exclaimed Annie.

"Yes," he answered, curbing a little his passion; "I have loved Hester ever since Grant here carried me into John Morley's house; or, at any rate, ever since I first saw her there. Does it surprise you? It ought not. My father feels no surprise."

"Does *he* know?" asked Grant, in a voice of concern.

"Yes, and consents to it,—is anxious for it," said Robert. "Why! what is there strange about it? You know her, both of you; what is there to surprise you in the fact that I love her?"

"Oh, nothing!" they both answered in one breath; and then all three were silent, none of them looking at the others. Annie was quite calm now, and ready to submit to any of her husband's directions. He said, gravely, she must give up her intended visit to Miss Waldron, and that she could wait where she was, while he fetched her one of her own hats and cloaks.

Robert staid behind with her, but Annie did not enter into conversation with him ; and he felt embarrassed by her silence. Very few words passed between them before Grant's return, but he shook hands heartily with her before she left.

"I like you, and I thank you very much for what you had intended to do," he said, and he turned his steps homewards ; while Grant accompanied Annie back safely to her own house.

Carl listened in silence to the story of Annie's escapade, but it touched and made to vibrate painfully many chords in his nature. His friend Miss Waldron had been gradually losing some of the brightness of the halo with which she had crowned herself ; but this impertinence towards Hester appeared to show him the shallowness of her heart. Those who demand little homage for themselves, require the whole world to acknowledge the superiority of those they love. He was too deeply wounded by her conduct to speak of it, even to his sister, but he could ask a question about Hester.

"Are they so very poor, then ?" he said.

"So poor," answered Annie, "that she asked Miss Waldron and me if we could give her any work to do."

"Yet Hester has just taken in a poor woman," observed Grant, "and fitted up a little out-building at the back of the house for her. She asked me to go to see her yesterday. A poor creature. I found her almost frightened to death by some London fellow, who told her her lungs were almost gone. I don't believe it. I dare say it is she who wants the sewing, for she must live."

"But why should not Hester tell us so ?" asked Annie.

"There is some mystery about it," he replied ; "the woman has evidently been an educated woman. I asked her age particularly, and she said she was thirty-four.

She seemed oppressed by a peculiar kind of fear which I could not account for. I have my suspicions."

"What are they?" asked Carl, looking up eagerly.

Grant leaned over the table towards him, and lowered his voice to a whisper which would have been inaudible to the keenest ear outside the room.

"That this woman is no other than John Morley's lost wife," he said. "Mark you, it is no more than a suspicion, and it must be sacred with us. But if it be so—"

"Then God bless and help Hester!" cried Carl, rising suddenly, and making his escape to his study.

The conjecture just thrown out by Grant, which had struck his mind with the force of truth, moved Carl's heart to its depths. The thought of Hester very poor, and asking for work from Miss Waldron and Annie, had been enough in itself to awaken the most chivalrous sympathies of his nature; but if Grant's suspicions were true, what a story hung upon it! He pictured to himself John Morley, lost and buried in gloom, with his dreary house peopled by memories which were half a shame and half a sorrow; and this pale, lost shadow, haunting, unknown to him, the home of her happier days, but separated from him, not by walls merely, but by an impassable abyss which she dared not attempt to cross. And going from one to the other was Hester, speaking with the same tone, and looking with the same tenderness upon each of them. If he had but the right to share her secret! If he could only strengthen and uphold her when her spirit failed her along the straight and difficult path!

Underneath all these thoughts which stirred him there was a disguised and subtle undercurrent of emotion. If Hester had found and received to a shelter near herself, the lost Rose, would it be possible for her ever to become Robert Waldron's wife?

CHAPTER XLIV.

BLOW AFTER BLOW.

MISS WALDRON heard no more of her gift to Hester. By one common consent, arrived at by different processes, all those who had become acquainted with the circumstance permitted it to drop into apparent oblivion. Hester knew nothing of Annie's plan of revenge which had been prematurely nipped ; and as she never mentioned Miss Waldron's present again, Annie did not care to speak of it. She could not but acknowledge that her husband and Carl were right when they said that the whole thing must be suffered to pass, and that it would be dangerous to make an enemy of Miss Waldron. But she was glad Robert knew, exceedingly glad. She had no doubt it would come out some day or other from his lips, and cover his sister with confusion. In the meantime it was very difficult to maintain a pleasant and cordial demeanor towards her, when she came to see her and Carl so often.

This action of Miss Waldron had thrown difficulties into the paths of all. To Hester it made it a far from easy task to go to Aston Court, as she felt herself compelled to, in order to finish the business arrangements with Mr. Waldron, who had insisted upon advancing a sum of £ 500 instead of £ 200, which would set John Morley clear from his liabilities for about twelve months to come. Robert, on his part, found it so hard to keep this secret, and restrain his wrath, that he was not sorry when some pressing business

demanding his presence in London ; though it prevented him seeing Hester upon her rare visits to his father.

But for Carl the difficulty was tenfold. He had now been pastor of the Church at Little Aston for more than six months, and Miss Waldron began to be impatient at the slowness of his comprehension with respect to the marks of preference she showered upon him. She had become at last aware of a growing coldness in Annie Grant's manner, which was at once unaccountable and unpardonable, seeing that both Grant and Carl were under the patronage of her family. She could not brook any caprices in her inferiors but it was necessary to overlook those of Annie Grant, on account of Carl, whose study she could not invade if she had any serious disagreement with his sister. Her attachment for the young, handsome, and eloquent minister was growing into a folly, for the sake of which she was ready to sacrifice any pique, or endure any coolness from Annie. She fostered a hope, gathering strength every day, that Carl would at length take courage to woo the wealthy and eminent daughter of his patron.

On his part, Carl without Annie's aid, perhaps, would have been no slower than any other young man to understand her tokens of preference ; but they were no pleasure to him. How to act he did not know. He was most anxious to put an end to them ; but he did not at all see how it could be done. His delicate reverence for womanhood, and his dignified sense of duty as a pastor, imposed upon him the task of setting her to rights as soon as possible. He felt that their present intercourse hampered and fettered him in many of his duties ; and he waited with impatience some opportunity for gently and considerately dispelling her illusion. The opportunity arrived at last.

"You regard me as a sister, Carl," she said to him one evening as they crossed the park together in the dusk, after

she had stayed so long at Grant's house as to be afraid to return home alone. She had of late relinquished her strong-mindedness.

"Certainly," answered Carl, somewhat absently.

"Then you ought to tell me of my faults," she said, plaintively ; "I know I have so many faults, and by this time you must have discovered them. Poor dear Mr. Watson used to say he could not see any ; but you have keener sight than he had, Carl."

She dropped her eyes, and half turned away her face, lest Carl's keen sight should read her thoughts too plainly.

"How I would conquer any fault you pointed out," she continued, with effusion. "Oh ! this would be true friendship ! I should like you to tell me *all* you think of me. Could you not tell me all you think of me, dear Carl ?"

"I am afraid I should offend you," said Carl, in a low voice, the tone of which she misunderstood.

"Oh, no ! you could not offend me," she replied ; "it would be impossible ! O Carl, you don't know how I should love the truth from your lips. Sometimes while you are preaching I wonder if anybody can attain to the standard you set before us. Do you know anybody who is even striving after it, Carl ?"

"Yes, one," he answered.

"And who is that one ?" she asked with a beating heart ; "is it yourself, dear Carl."

"Not even myself," he said, gravely ; "I think my standard is simply this : ' If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.' I dare not say that I have attained to this forgetfulness of self, this daily cross."

"But who then is the one that does ?" demanded Miss Waldron.

"Hester Morley," answered Carl, with a secret exultation and great gladness of spirit.

Miss Waldron felt herself pierced through with this poignant shaft. She half withdrew her hand from Carl's arm ; but he, with an involuntary sympathy for the pain he had inflicted, pressed it closer to his side ; and with a fresh hope she laid it again more firmly and heavily upon its resting-place.

"I can tell you," he said, rapidly, "what I can say to no one else, with what delight I have watched Hester. She is more than what I once dreamed of women in my college days. My dreams were poor and vague. I did not know then what a woman's heart is."

"And you love her?" murmured Miss Waldron.

"Yes," he answered, lifting his hat from his head, with an instinctive gesture of reverence. "I love Hester as I love all that is good and true and lovely. I should be blind and foolish if I could do otherwise."

"Hester Morley!" cried Miss Waldron, in a voice of anguish ; "and I warned you against her!"

"If I had received a thousand warnings," said Carl, "it would have been the same."

"And you have proposed to her!" she exclaimed. "You are engaged to her?"

"No," he replied ; "I do not know that I shall ever tell her that I love her. She has another suitor, far above me, who has perhaps won her love. If Hester is not tempted by your brother's riches, I shall ask her to share my poverty."

"My brother!" ejaculated Miss Waldron.

"Yes," he said ; "you told me yourself that he met her clandestinely. I know that he formed an attachment for her many months ago."

"Do you suppose that Robert Waldron, of Aston

"Court could ever marry John Morley's daughter?" she asked, bitterly.

Carl did not answer, and she walked beside him for some minutes in silence, striving to keep down the passion which would fain have found vent. She could not conceal from herself the reason of this confidence reposed in her before he had owned his love to Hester herself. He had detected the sentiments which she had cherished for him. He the unknown, penniless, friendless student, chosen by herself, put into his living by her hand, had discovered that she loved him,—and rejected her! She knew very well that she had not attempted to hide her affection for him; but her mortification was none the less bitter.

"I do not ask you to keep my secret," said Carl gently. "I do not know that I wish it to be a secret. If it were not that I have promised to leave Hester unbiased; if my honor was not pledged to do so, I should have asked John Morley for his daughter before this. Not that we could marry at present; we are both young. But that I might have the right to help her, that we might help each other, to bear the sorrows of life."

His voice, which had been calm at first, faltered as he uttered the last sentence, and fell into such a tone of tenderness that Miss Waldron felt as if she could not bear to hear him speak another word. At that moment, for the first time in her life, she felt old. These two young creatures, Carl who was ten years her junior, and Hester whom she had scarcely ceased to consider as a child, stood before her for an instant in a separate world of youth and glory. How warm and bright and joyous was the youth she had left behind her! She felt herself suddenly at a great disadvantage. She was a thing laid aside, a being passed by; while Hester rejoiced in a wealth which no money could ever purchase. She shivered at the thought of being old. A des-

perate struggle was going on in her mind. Only one thing was clear to her,—she must bear herself bravely before Carl.

“You have taken me a little by surprise,” she said; “yet now I come to think of it, nothing could be more natural. You recollect I predicted something like this. Hester is of your own age, and your own rank in life; you could not look much higher. She is the only girl in our congregation who is your equal by birth and education; the others, no doubt, are somewhat beneath you. I wish for your sake, that John Morley was not so greatly involved in difficulties.”

“I know they are poor,” said Carl.

“Worse than that,” continued Miss Waldron. “After your confidence, I feel justified in telling you all I know. John Morley is in imminent danger of bankruptcy and disgrace. In fact, but for my father he would have been a bankrupt already.”

It was Carl's turn to feel a painful contraction of the heart. If John Morley had surrendered his ancient resentment so far as to suffer himself to be saved from bankruptcy by the Waldrons, could it be anything but a sign of what must be in the end? He had never before chafed at his narrow means; but now, as he compared his own salary of £150—for £50 had been added to it since the old pastor's death,—with the large income of Robert Waldron, he felt that life was very unequal. Almost any passionate emotion makes man long for that lost equality, which is, perhaps, part of the forfeit for the original sin of ambition. It seemed preposterous to Carl that Robert should receive monthly twice his annual income. Set them down in circumstances on a perfect level, and see which would prove himself the better man! But now, because Robert could rescue Hester and her father from poverty and disgrace, he

would no doubt attain his end, and Hester would be lost to himself.

"Miss Waldron," he said, after a long pause, "I do not suppose I shall ever tell Hester of my love. It seems to me as if she will never belong to me. But I shall never love any other woman as I love her. If John Morley were branded for the vilest of crimes in the face of the whole world, she would still be the woman I love."

"It is an infatuation!" muttered Miss Waldron, between her teeth.

"Perhaps so," he answered, calmly; "but it is an infatuation sweeter than any pleasure I ever tasted."

"You are not the devoted servant of God I thought you," she said, austere.

"I trust I am His servant," replied Carl with increasing calmness; "and I hope that every day will find me more devoted to His service. But He does not require me to be blind. If He should give Hester to me, I will take her as His most precious gift. But if not, what else can I do but submit myself to His will?"

Miss Waldron did not answer, but she withdrew her hand finally from his arm. Carl understood the significant action, and felt sorry for it; but he fancied that her good sense, if not her religion, could at least restore peace between them in the course of a few days. It was most desirable that he should continue to be on friendly terms with the most influential woman belonging to his Church. He believed firmly in her goodness still, though he had sounded the shallowness of her mind; and it did not occur to him that she might nurse her jealousy and disappointment into revenge. In silence they completed their walk; and when Miss Waldron dismissed him coldly, without asking him to go in, he turned away a little sorrowful for her, but not in the least apprehensive for himself.

Miss Waldron was doomed to receive a second blow the same night, almost as severe as the first. Before she had time to yield to the passion which Carl's confession had awakened, her father entered the room, where she was still sitting with her bonnet and shawl on in an apathetic state of bewilderment. Mr. Waldron was growing impatient for the success of his schemes ; while Robert was hanging back from the fatal moment which must decide the future relationship between himself and Hester. It was all in vain that his father reminded him that faint heart never won fair lady. There was one memory which always made his heart faint, whenever he thought of asking for the hand of John Morley's daughter. Mr. Waldron resolved at last to consult his daughter. If she, the infallible oracle of the house, could be won over to his side, Robert would surely lay aside his fears.

"My dear," he said, "it is probable that Robert will at last consent to marry. It is what we have both desired for years. You have never given me a moment's uneasiness ; but for him I am still anxious. To marry a religious woman might be the salvation of his soul. For what says the apostle, 'The unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife ?'"

As he uttered the familiar quotation, conscience carried back his memory to the day when he and his old pastor had gone to expostulate with John Morley upon his approaching marriage. But this case, he said to himself, was altogether different. His son, though not a professed member, was as it were in the porch of the Church, and needed only Hester's hand to guide him into its inner sanctuary.

"Robert," he continued, after a scarcely perceptible pause, "loves a girl, beautiful, well-educated, and pious. She has, it is true, neither money nor position ; but these are

mere accidents of life of which Christian people should make no account. I have been accused of pride, and of looking down upon the other members of the Church as our inferiors. 'This marriage will be a fresh link between us.'

He spoke with the air of a sovereign who makes some great concessions to his people. Miss Waldron preserved an ominous silence, but she lifted herself up, and raised her head to hear what was coming next.

"Yes," he said ; "Robert is in love with Hester Morley : and he has my full approbation and consent. It will heal old wounds, and make atonement for the past. You know Hester well ; she has been almost like your own child. You will give her a sister's welcome, Sophia." It was an uncommon occurrence for her father to pronounce her name, and he did it in a softened voice. But Miss Waldron did not catch the softening of the tone, nor her name, as she rose majestically from her chair, with a dull gleam in her eyes, and her lips working with a passion now too strong to control.

"Never !" she exclaimed ; "if you are become a fool, and Robert an idiot, I shall retain my sense of what is fitting and right. Never will I consent to look upon Hester Morley as my sister."

She shuddered at the bare mention of such a thing ; and casting a frown upon her father which filled him with dismay, she sailed out of the room with an air of dignity that concealed how crushed and wounded her spirit had been that day.

CHAPTER XLV.

RETRIBUTION BEGUN.

OPPOSITION had always been congenial to Mr. Waldron. He had enjoyed pressing towards any object through a whole host of opponents, and then watching them gradually reconcile themselves to a measure which they had done their utmost to prevent. But his daughter's positive and active antagonism to his scheme made him feel vexed and unhappy. He did not think for a moment of giving it up: but he had reckoned upon Miss Waldron's feminine penetration, and upon the interest and affection of long-standing which he supposed to exist between her and Hester. He was very far indeed from divining the mixed motives which were at war in his daughter's mind.

Miss Waldron herself, with all her long practice in analyzing her own inner life, could not dissect her present feelings, but for a time gave herself up to uncontrolled passion. Her closet, that night and the next day, could have told of a very different scene to the usually calm and self-complacent devotions of its mistress. The whole circle, Hester Carl, Grant and his wife, were her dependents and inferiors, yet she had no power to punish them. Had she no power? She would think about it.

The business transactions which had brought Hester occasionally to Aston Court were now concluded. John Morley had received a loan from Mr. Waldron upon a mortgage, and had spent a portion of it at once in paying

the most pressing of his creditors ; but the tide of debt was still mounting, and would soon overflow this feeble break-water. Secretly it was upon John Morley's poverty that both Mr Waldron and Robert built their hopes : a more sandy foundation than either of them expected. The future to be offered to Hester was so dazzling compared to her present lot, so far beyond anything her most daring girlish fancies could have dreamed, that they counted upon awakening her ambition. It was incredible that a position which would be eagerly snatched at by many a well-born and wealthy family could be rejected by the daughter of a man hopelessly involved in business embarrassments. Looking at it in this light, Mr. Waldron felt satisfied that Hester would gladly become Robert's wife. Going round to the other side, and regarding the projected marriage with the purged and enlightened eyes of a Christian man who knows this world to be no more than a training school for eternity, a chilly doubt crept over him that she could not be tempted by all the grandeur and ease they could offer her.

Robert Waldron was growing hungry for a sight of Hester. Strange to say, though he had haunted old Madame's garret, to his own imminent danger and her uncontrollable terror, for Lawson had begun to dart in home at all sorts of unexpected moments, he had never happened to come across Hester. He had found it impossible to stay long away from Little Aston, and since his return not a day had passed without his paying a visit to Madame. But the little one did not come to see her so often, said Madame ; on the contrary, she sent to invite her to visit her in her own home, which was much more *triste* than her little garret.

But the chance came at last ; the hour so long waited for. The very morning after Miss Waldron's defiance of her father's wishes, Hester felt obliged to pay her last visit

to Aston Court,—a visit of gratitude rather than of business. She had still no special desire to avoid meeting Robert. Her large, girlish heart embraced him, as it did her father and Rose, in a warmth of pity and sorrow which could never make her feel indifferent to him. They were all three lost in a labyrinth, where they wandered solitarily and in toilsome paths ; and she, looking on with tearful eyes longed to lead them back to a resting-place.

She found Mr. Waldron, as she had hoped, alone and she uttered her thanks in few but expressive words. She told him that the sum he had advanced would meet their expenses for the next half-year.

“And what after that?” asked Mr. Waldron, in a tone of anxiety.

“I can scarcely tell,” answered Hester, with a smile faltering between fear and courage, “I am not afraid, not very much afraid, at least. Something may happen before then.”

“You would do anything for your father’s sake, Hester?” he said.

“Anything,” she repeated, fervently ; “only show me what I can do, and I will do it.”

Mr. Waldron took both her hands into his, and looked with a marvellous gentleness for him into her pale face with its faint smile.

“My dear child,” he said, “I have a plan in my mind for you which would set your father free from his difficulties, and place you both in a position above care of any kind. You are a brave good girl, and I love you like a daughter. You could trust yourself in my hands, Hester?”

“Yes,” she answered, lifting her eyes to his, inquiringly.

“Stay here a few minutes,” he added ; “I am not quite ready to tell you my plan yet.”

He went away, leaving her in the room which she re-

membered to have first entered with Rose. The great life-size portraits of Luther and Melancthon gazed down steadily upon her from the wall, as they had done when she looked up wonderingly to them as a little child. The recollection was more vivid and sad than usual, for she had left Rose in a paroxysm of vain remorse in her poor refuge. She recalled their meeting with Robert in the park the first time she had ever seen him; and the light, gay, air of happiness which to her eyes had surrounded both him and Rose. Hester's face had assumed again the pallor and care which had almost vanished from it for a little while; and she looked once more like a blanched and frail flower which has grown up without sunshine. When Mr. Waldron left her, she leaned back in her chair, and closed her eyes with a languor to which she would not yield in any one's presence; and so absorbed did she grow in her melancholy thoughts, that she did not hear the opening of the door, as it turned almost noiselessly upon its hinges.

It was Robert who entered, having been found by his father, and sent to learn his fate. He was disquieted and troubled, and he stole forward with the quietness of a mother who fears to disturb the slumber of her child, or with the caution of a naturalist who snatches a glance at some rare wild denizen of the woods, which will take to flight at his approach. He had not seen Hester since the evening she had spent at Aston Court,—that happy evening which had seemed to him an omen of good both to himself and John Morley. But how changed she was in her attitude of sorrowful languor! What lines of new care and anxiety were upon her beautiful face! He would give the whole world to comfort her and to shield her from every breath of adversity in the future. How should he let her know how much he loved her?

"Hester!" he whispered after a while, in a low tone,

but one which aroused her from her reverie and sent the color flushing swiftly to her cheeks and forehead. She had not known that he was at home ; and this was the first time she had met him since she had found her father's wife, a wretched and broken-hearted woman, in the streets. A peculiar tempest of emotion swept across her. She had pitied him with a very true, a very deep, a very tender compassion ; and this pity still lived in her heart. But the sense of his sin had increased tenfold since Rose also had been cast directly upon her compassion and mercy. She knew he had repented of it, and his repentance had bound her to cover it with the same charity which she extended to Rose. But there was an expression upon his grave face which made her eyelids quiver, though she would not lower them, and sent a chilly dread of him shivering through her. He felt that it would be best to cast himself precipitately upon her agitation and tremor. He did not know what adverse shadow stood between them.

“ Hester, ” he said, drawing near to her, but not daring to touch her hand, which hung motionless at her side, “ my father has sent me to you ; I come here by his wish to tell you now what I have longed to tell you a thousand times. I love you, and have loved you from the first moment I saw you. Hush ! Let me speak first, I beseech you. If you would only believe me, I have loved you from the moment when I first saw you as a little child, from the time you first let me hold you in my arms. It is very long ago ; but, if it had not been for one false step, I should have asked you long before this to be my wife. My father loves you already as his daughter. You have power over me, Hester ; you can mould me to your will. With you beside me, I shall become whatever you wish to make me. It is my soul I commit to you ; I implore you to lead me to all that

is good and Christian. I love you most of all because I believe you will help me to work out my salvation."

He had spoken with profound earnestness, and with long pauses between the sentences, as if waiting for some token from her. He knew that it was better to appeal to her religious sympathies than to expatiate on his own passion. He saw the color fade away from her face, and be followed by a deadly paleness; but this was the only change. He did not know whether this immobility augured good or ill; but he resumed his broken speech with a more pathetic passion.

"Do you hear me, Hester?" he asked. "I tell you it is my soul I commit to you to do what you will with it. I know myself well. If I loved any other woman, as I love you, she might ruin me body and soul, if she chose. But you would save me. Is there any thing I can say which would prevail with you more than this? If you consent to be my wife, I can be a real Christian. I shall be sure that God has pardoned my sin; cast it, as you would say, like a stone, into the depths of the sea, to be remembered against me no more forever. I have asked this of Him, as a sign of His forgiveness. For God's sake, Hester, do not drive me to despair. Let me have God's love and yours."

He knew well that he must not kneel at her feet, or take her hand into his; but he drew so near to her that he could almost whisper the words into her ear. Still she did not move or speak or raise her eyelids, which had sunk at last. He only felt more than saw, that she was trembling a little.

"Ah!" he cried, with a ring of bitterness and self-reproach in his voice, "I know what keeps you silent. But even she, if she were living, would bid you forgive and listen to me."

"Is she then not living?" asked Hester, her lips white and quivering, so that she could scarcely utter the question.

"I believe not," he answered hurriedly. "I have many reasons to believe it. The past can die now and be buried. Think what we could do for your father; how I could make atonement to the utmost. How rich we could make him—how happy yet among his books! In a little time he must come in contact with fresh troubles, perhaps disgrace. I would shield him from every care; and he is growing old. What will become of you when he is old and very poor, my darling? Let me make this atonement for his sake. Think of him."

"I do think of him," murmured Hester; "and for his sake I should say, No, even if I loved you as you wish,—if I loved you as much as you say you love me. You have never fairly looked at what you have done. You have never repented of your sin."

"Not repented!" echoed Robert.

"You do not know what repentance is," cried Hester, her grey eyes flashing with a light he had never seen in them. "Oh, if you had repented, you could never ask me to be your wife! Me! Is it possible that you, or your father, could ever think of me? No. You have borne no punishment for your sin; and it is not in your nature to repent without punishment."

"Borne no punishment!" he repeated. "What then do you call the ten years of exile which banished me from my home?"

"They were years of pleasant travel in foreign lands," she answered. "Have you not told me of them? You had everything you could wish, and you enjoyed the time fully. When you began to yearn for home again, you returned to it. I will tell you who has borne the punishment:—My father, who has never smiled since you sinned; and she, who has no home and no friends, who has been an outcast

in the world, despised and broken-hearted. If you could see her now, would you dare to ask me to be your wife?"

To Hester the image of Rose was very present; but to Robert it was a memory of so many years past, and so unwelcome an intruder, that he could not summon it readily to his mind. As he had told Hester, he felt assured that she was dead, for such lost ones seldom live without giving some sign of their existence. But there was something in Hester's tone and face which made his heart die within him. It was not that she was indignant or impassioned. There was rather a tranquil yet intense pity for him, which placed her at an immeasurable height above him.

"O Hetty," he cried, "little Hetty, is it quite impossible for me to win your love?"

"Why do you ask me?" she said, in a troubled voice. "It is impossible; you must know it to be impossible. Oh, why did you ever think of such a thing? How could you ever think of it?"

They stood for a minute or two in silence, her calm, compassionate eyes shining upon him from across the great gulf between him and her. "Besides all this," said a voice in his inmost soul, "between us and you, there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us that would come from thence."

"Hester," he cried again, "have pity upon me. This is my punishment indeed."

"I am very sorry for you" answered her pitiful voice; "but you ought to have felt at first that it would be impossible. My father would rather go down to the very depths of poverty than see me here. Good-bye. I can never come again."

He had thrown himself upon a chair, and hidden his face from the steady reproachful compassion of her look;

and she lingered for a minute, looking sorrowfully at him, and around the room she should enter no more. This life of wealth and ease would have been very pleasant ; even the brief snatches she had seen of it had been an enjoyment to her. She was growing a little weary of the long daily struggle, and the sordid cares of poverty. If things had been different, what a glory it would have been to John Morley to see his daughter the mistress of Aston Court ! But it was impossible now.

Robert Waldron heard her murmur good-bye once more, but he did not raise his head. She lingered, as if searching for some word to comfort him, but there was none which her lips could utter. He listened to her footfall across the floor to the glass-doors opening upon the terrace, but he could not believe that she was going to leave him. He raised his head in time to catch a last glance of her pitying face, and her gesture of farewell ; and then Hester was lost to him. He did not think of following her. Eleven years ago, he had bartered for the pleasures of sin for a season, the happiness he craved in vain to-day.

CHAPTER XLVI.

A PASTORAL VISIT.

IT is impossible to describe the disappointment of Mr. Waldron, when, after an hour's absence, he returned to the house, and found Robert alone and Hester gone. Robert told him of his rejection with a suppressed mournfulness which troubled his father's heart more than the most vehement expressions of grief. Mr. Waldron felt a little mortified that Hester's conscience should be more sensitive than his own. If he, a deacon of the church, had considered his son's early error atoned for, and consigned to oblivion, why should this young girl set up her childish judgment against his? Yet in his heart of hearts he knew that she was right. Robert, even in the first shock and agony of his disappointment, acknowledged the same. It was in truth a greater shock to him than it ought to have been; for in spite of all his doubts and hesitations, there had really been a well-grounded assurance in his mind that Hester would not reject him, with all his advantages; but she had now done it in such a manner as to pluck up every root of hope. She had said it was impossible with such utter decision, blended with an inexpressible pity,—a pity which he felt keenly could never grow into love,—that he knew he must never again approach her, or address himself to her on this subject. He loved her more passionately than before, but a dull despair had joined itself to his pas-

sion. Those pangs of punishment without which, she had said, he could not repent, had already come upon him.

This state of mind, a novel one to Robert Waldron, might have proved salutary, but for the intervention of his sister, who, while rejoicing that Hester had declined the honor offered her, could not forgive her for its rejection. When Mr. Waldron announced to her that Hester had positively refused her brother, she could not refrain her tongue from a spiteful little speech, uttered in Robert's hearing.

"Don't talk to me about Hester Morley's scruples," she said; "I know her too well. It is because we have chosen a handsome boy for our pastor that she has said No to Robert."

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Waldron, whose chagrin was only second to his son's.

"I mean," she answered, "that Carl Bramwell is in love with her, and she with him. I have suspected it for some time; and he confessed it to me only the other evening. If we had invited David Scott to the church at Little Aston, Hester Morley would have been only too proud to accept Robert."

Neither Mr. Waldron nor Robert felt quite sure of this, yet the poisoned shaft entered into their hearts. Mr. Waldron's thoughts turned with regret to the day when among the seventy students at the College he had selected this polished and scholarly young man to become the successful rival of his son. He could not help being fond of Carl, and he had had in the beginning, a scheme for furthering a love-match between him and his favorite, Hester. But that was before he had ever thought of her as his own possible future daughter, and now he could only be sorry that he had chosen him for the pastor of their little church.

As for Hester, she retraced her steps homewards, after

her interview with Robert, in a strange mood of bewilderment and conflicting feelings. The fine old park, fresh clothed in the beauty of spring, lay around her ; and she could scarcely realize the fact that she had just refused to become mistress of it, and of the great mansion belonging to it, which was the grandest place she had ever seen. The larch-trees were fringed and tasselled with green leaflets, with a crimson cone here and there among them ; and the noble smooth-limbed beeches were white with their satin leaf-buds. The scent of violets hidden about the roots of the trees, and of cowslips nodding among the grass, was wafted past her upon the soft breeze. High over head rose the sky, higher and serener than in winter, and a few cool grey clouds floated across it. How different was all this from the close street, and the gloomy walls, and the dusky windows of her home ! Hester sighed heavily, and there was a multitude of regrets in her sigh. Alas ! for the time that had gone by, and the ineffaceable sin which had been stamped upon it forever.

She knew by the deep trouble of her own heart, that she could have loved Robert Waldron ; and for the sake of the love which might have been, a fine, sweet sense of tenderness softened her spirit towards him. The days came back to her vividly when she had loved him with the full-hearted ardor of a child ; and if he had only remained good and true, so would she have loved him now. She began to see the nature of his punishment ; and to feel something of its weight. She wished passionately that he had never seen her—but there, again, his own disobedience had wrought out its own consequences. If he had been true to his word, it was possible that he might never have met with her ; it was certain that there would not have been the familiarity between them which had been brought about by their frequent meetings at Madame Lawson's. He must have been

in love with her all the time, thought Hester ; and her face crimsoned at the thought.

She had no one to tell of what had befallen her that morning,—of the vision which had opened suddenly to her, but from which she had turned steadfastly away. It would be impossible to speak of it to her father, and still more so to Rose. She had not seen much of Annie lately, and this was not a secret to tell to a woman whose husband and brother shared every thought. So she was obliged to hide it away during the daytime, while she went about her work ; and at night she pondered over it unhealthily, contrasting what was with what might have been.

It was impossible for Carl not to see upon Hester's face a deeper shadow than ~~that~~ which had rested upon it for some time before the evening, now several weeks ago, which they had spent together at Aston Court. He had not been so often at John Morley's house of late ; but Grant told him that something was amiss with Hester, and that if she did not rally quickly, she would have to leave home, which she had never left before, for change of air. He had said the same to Hester herself, and given her a great dread. For how could she leave home now above all other times, when Rose was a pensioner upon her?

Carl argued with himself that it was his duty as a pastor to visit Hester, and he would do so as a pastor merely. He was a little petulant when Annie inquired where he was going, and how long he would be. His mind was so intently fixed upon the duty he was about to perform, that he knew nothing of what was passing around him, until he found himself in Hester's little sitting-room up stairs. It was the second time only, that he had been permitted to penetrate to this room. He was excited by it, why, he could scarcely tell. All here belonged to Hester ; the books, the little desk, the work-basket,—no hand but hers touched them.

He caught a momentary glimpse of a mysterious shadow flitting past the dim casement of the old nursery opposite the window. It was not Hester's figure but that of the strange unknown woman, of whom Grant had whispered his suspicion. Would Hester speak of her to him? for he was come as her pastor, her guide, and adviser, with more influence and authority than an ordinary friend.

Asking himself very anxiously this question, for in the answer to it lay the possibility of a very close intimacy between them, he turned round upon hearing the lifting of the latch, and met Hester face to face. They spoke to one another quietly; but in Hester's veins as well as Carl's there was running a rapid current of excitement, which would make it possible for him to move her either to laughter or tears. All his elaborately prepared speeches died away out of his memory; he could not recall a word he had intended to say as a pastor to this soul committed to his care. There fell a great silence upon them, and an uncertainty; yet a silence and uncertainty more dainty perhaps, in its fluttering embarrassment, than any eloquent assurance could have been. Hester's hand rested upon the table, and Carl saw it and nothing else. He was afraid that if he looked into her face, he should never be able to fulfil his office.

"I have been thinking much of you lately," he said at last, speaking in short sentences instead of the rounded phrases he had intended to employ. "You were committed to my charge. I have a right to speak. You are in great sorrow. When I look down upon you in chapel, your face is pale and sad. You do not sing as you used to do. I know your life is lonely, and very full of cares. But God has ordained it, and He is infinite Love. We also love you, Annie, and Grant and I. Why are you so cast down and disquieted? Is it anything you can tell to me? I might

be able to help you. Is there nothing I can do for you?"

"Oh! I have been very miserable," said Hester, with a sharp accent of pain in her voice.

"There will come a change," answered Carl; "'though heaviness may endure for a night, joy cometh in the morning.'"

"The morning is very long in coming," she said, sighing mournfully.

"It may seem so," he continued, "it may even be so, but it is coming surely and steadily. You are weary now, till your heart faints within you, but it will not be forever. Cannot you tell me your new trouble?"

"Yes," answered Hester, acting upon a sudden impulse to confide in him, though she had resolved to bear her burden alone. It was growing too heavy for her now, and her spirit was beginning to fail. "Yes, I will tell you, and you can help me. Do you see the door and window opposite? There is a little room there, and some weeks ago my father gave me his permission to let a poor woman come and live in it. She is very poor and very ill. Mr. Grant has seen her."

"He told me so," said Carl.

"He believed she was not likely to recover at first," continued Hester, "but she is getting better now; not so strong that she can ever go away, and yet not so ill that she is near death. What am I to do? She has no friend in the world except me; not a creature to care for her or help her. But we are so poor, and I am afraid sometimes that we shall be obliged to leave this house altogether; then what is to become of her?"

"You are meeting trouble half-way now," he answered cheerfully.

Hester drew closer to him, with a frightened face, and whispered her next few sentences.

"Hush! it is Rose Morley, my father's wife. You have heard of her? My father never sees her; she runs no risk of him seeing her. If I had not known she would be safe, I never dare have taken her in. She was utterly homeless and friendless, and I brought her here to die, as we both thought. You know my father nearly killed Robert Waldron at our own door? But now we know she may perhaps live years and years: think what that means. Did I do right to take her in? Ought I to have turned her away into the world ill, even dying as we thought? Do you think my father will not be glad at last, when he comes to know?"

"God bless you, Hester," cried Carl, laying his hand upon hers which still rested upon the table, as if she needed that support to keep her from trembling too greatly.

"You don't know what it is like to go from my father's presence to hers," resumed Hester. "Sometimes I wonder why God lets such things come to pass, and I have hard thoughts of Him. That is the worst of all. Don't be shocked with me, but after all, Rose does not seem so very wicked, nor Robert Waldron. She is very penitent really, truly penitent, and bears her punishment well; but she is solitary and very sorrowful. Will you sometimes come to see her? You can come as a minister without any one being surprised; but you must not be too harsh to her. Will you help me by doing this for her?"

"Help you!" said Carl, "I would give my life for you."

He scarcely knew what he was saying, and she did not seem to notice it. Once more he saw the pale face behind the dim casement opposite. Hester also saw it, and the tears stood in her eyes.

"No one knows it but me, and now you," she said. "It has been too heavy a burden for me to bear alone. I am not very old yet, but I feel old, older than almost any one I know; a great deal older than Lawson's mother. I

suppose it is the anxiety ; and now I have more than ever. Mr. Grant said I must leave home ; but how can I ever leave home ? There was my father first, and now there is Rose as well. You must come and see her for yourself."

"We will go at once," he answered ; yet he lingered, and looked into her face with the color mounting upon his own, and an expression of utter anxiety coming across it. He had a word or two to say, which, left unspoken, would make this interview, sought by him, altogether unsatisfactory and incomplete. He hesitated and stammered, then reproached his coward courage, and spoke hastily.

"I am your pastor, your soul is committed to me. You said just now that Robert Waldron did not seem wicked,—that was your own word—not wicked in your eyes. Do you know that he loves you?"

"Yes," she replied, the crimson flush mantling her cheeks as well as his, "he told me so ; but Rose is living near me. What could I say to him? I could never, never become his wife."

"Thank God ! ' cried Carl.

CHAPTER XLVII.

ANOTHER PASTORAL VISIT.

CARL followed Hester down stairs, and across the court, which seemed dark to him, for the glass in the window of the old nursery was scarcely transparent, and shed but little light on the outside staircase leading up to it. Hester opened the door quietly, and Carl had time to see Rose before she was aware of their entrance. She was leaning languidly back in a cushioned and padded chair by the fire, the light of which fell upon her worn and colorless face, and the thin fair hair pushed back carelessly from it. Her eyes were shut, and the whole aspect of the wan woman was one of complete dejection and of banishment from every gladness in life. At the sound of voices she sprang up with a glance of terror which showed how she lived in hourly dread of discovery. There was something inexpressibly forlorn in the peculiarity of her circumstances, which touched Carl's heart to the core. He clasped her emaciated hand in his own, and pressed it with a warmth and heartiness which he had not ventured to bestow upon Hester's.

"Do you know who I am?" asked Rose, looking him searchingly in the face with her dim blue eyes.

"Hester has trusted me with all your history," he answered. "I am come to see you, and I shall come often, to make your life here less solitary. No one else knows; we alone have your secret."

"I am only afraid of two persons finding it out too soon," replied Rose, drearily ; " my husband, and one other ; you know who I mean. He was trying to find me, and I felt as if I could do nothing else but come here. Do you think he will ever guess that I am here ? "

"Never !" replied Carl emphatically.

"Hester tells me he has never married," said Rose, a glimmer of satisfaction dawning upon her face ; "I am sorry for that. If he had a wife he would not be troubled about me. But even if he did not try to find me, I could not go away from here. I cannot tell you what it is to think of leaving my home again ; it is the only home I have, and Hester has promised I shall stay in it. It is more lonely than you think ; I am here, day and night, all alone, yet I would not go away for the world. I know my husband will forgive me some time, and be very sorry for me. I have often wished for some clergyman to talk to ; for there are hundreds and thousands of questions keep coming into my poor head. I am not very clever ; but, perhaps, you will answer some of these questions. Only you are a very young man, and you do not know much of life yet."

"Perhaps not," answered Carl gently ; "but I know something of God."

Rose looked again steadily into his face, which wore an air of grave yet tender reverence even for her, a lost and wretched woman. Her heart was sick for some communion with one who had authority to speak of God ; that heart-sickness which forms the secret strength of the priesthood in every age ; and Carl, with his noble and thoughtful face, and his keen eyes bent with unspoken compassion upon her, seemed like a messenger come from God to her.

"I think I could speak better to you alone," said Rose.

Hester left them at once, and Carl, taking the only other chair which was in the little room, seated himself op-

posite Rose. She did not seem in any hurry to begin the conversation with him, but sat playing listlessly with her work which lay upon her lap ; and he waited patiently for her to ask him some of the questions which troubled her.

"I have something to tell you that I dare not tell Hester," she said at last, her head drooping and her cheeks flushing a little ; "she is like an angel almost, as innocent and ignorant. Sometimes I wish she was more like other girls ; but she has always been quite alone, and grown up very strange. Oh ! she is strange, is Hetty. I suppose I have done something towards it. Are you a friend of hers?"

"To be sure I am," answered Carl, smiling to himself ; for she was not looking towards him, but gazing into the fire before her.

"Then perhaps you will know why I feel a very, very long way off from her," she said, wistfully ; "I love her more than I can tell, but she is as far away as if she were one of the stars. I can talk to you better than to her. I am afraid to tell her all my secret ; yet why I do not know. Why should I be afraid of little Hetty?"

Carl looked again at her with a glance of profound sorrow. He could have told her that it was her own sense of sin and shame which raised the barrier between her and Hester, but he did not. She seemed to catch his meaning from his silence ; for she bowed her head, and burst into an agony of weeping.

"Oh ! I know, I know," she sobbed, when she had ceased to weep ; "but how can I come before God ? How can I help being horribly afraid of Him ?"

"Because God knows all your life," answered Carl tenderly ; "and because His perfect holiness is consistent with perfect mercy. We can only know in part, and for give in part ; but He has that complete knowledge of you, that you can have no thought hidden from Him. There-

fore you can go to Him speechlessly without drawing back, as you do from Hester."

"Do you think my husband will ever forgive me?" she asked.

"Only in part," said Carl, with deeper tenderness; "you must not hope for more. In this as in everything else, man can only copy God very imperfectly. He will forgive you, it may be, in the hour of his death, or yours; but not before. There is a reproach and dishonor which cannot be wiped away."

"But what is to become of me?" cried Rose, wringing her hands in a paroxysm of grief and despair; "how am I to lead this horrible life? It would be better for me to die; a hundred times better. Oh! you don't know what it is."

"Is it much happier for Hester or your husband?" asked Carl, reproachfully; "and they have been guilty of no sin."

"No," she exclaimed, turning quickly upon him; "and why does God let them suffer for my folly? Why did not God strike me dead, before I brought all this evil upon them? They have done no wrong, yet they are as miserable as I am."

"I spoke rashly," he said; "they are far happier than you. Hester at least is not unhappy in herself. There is no anguish like the memory of sin."

"That is true," she moaned; "I could bear anything better than that. I remember the time when I did not think myself a sinner. I remember telling Miss Waldron I kept all God's commandments. I was a poor, silly thing then; I know better now."

There was a painfully pathetic mournfulness in this confession, which Rose made in an abstracted and dreamy

tone, as if she had lost herself in the recollection of those innocent days.

Carl did not break in upon her thoughts ; and the silence prolonged itself for several minutes.

"Do you know I have not quite made up my mind about telling you my secret," she said, when she roused herself to the consciousness of his presence, "I am afraid you will tell Hester, and she will be farther off from me than ever. Do you think she will?"

"Tell me what it is," he answered, gently ; "and if I think she will, I will keep it from her."

"Oh !" she said, shrinking and trembling, while her face burned,— "I have never told anybody who knows my history. They believe that I am a widow ; everybody believed it ; and that my little girl is an orphan. I called her Hester because—ah ! I scarcely know why—Hester was the name I loved best ; and I fancied somehow that she would come home to live with the first Hester. But now I dare not tell her."

"Where is your little girl?" asked Carl in a quiet and soothing voice.

"She was born in France," she answered ; "I left Falaise, and went on and on through the country, not caring much, till I came to a little country convent, where there was a hospital for the country people,—for the old, and sick and children, something like the work-houses here ; but not quite the same, because the sisters were the nurses ; and there my little child was born. They did not want to christen her Hester, but they did it at last, only they added Maria to it ; Hester Maria ; and they kept us there for six months. It was a very strange six months. I felt happier than I did before, and thought oftener of God, and of His Son, Jesus Christ. But I never told the sisters about myself ; and after a while I knew I must do something to get

my own living and the baby's. They found me a place as lady's maid, in a Catholic family, and I had to leave my baby at the convent, and go away to Paris. Then I changed into an English family ; and after six years, I agreed to come back to England. I saw him, you know who, once in Paris, but he did not see me, and I felt quite faint. If I'd fainted he would have known who it was. So I came back to England."

"And your little girl?" said Carl again.

"I had scarcely ever seen her," continued Rose's wailing voice, "but then I paid the good sisters for her board, and brought her back with me. She is a pretty little thing ; but so quiet, so sage and still. She is like the sisters themselves ; you would say she never played or laughed. I was obliged to put her into a school in London, and she could never have any holidays, for I had no home, and neither of us have a single friend in the world. She has never been away from that school for four years, and it is in a close street in London. She does not know what it is to love a father or mother like other children. Oh ! why did not God strike me dead ? And now her last half-year has not been paid, and they will be cruel to my poor little Hester. I know what many schools are. They won't send her out into the streets, but they will make a drudge, and a victim of her, to bear everybody's faults. Oh ! I know how my little one is suffering ; but if God would only let me die, I am sure my husband would let Hester have her to live with her. Don't you think he would ? He is a good man."

She buried her face in her hands, and broke again into a passion of tears. Carl deliberated for some minutes before attempting to offer her any consolation ; and then he laid his hand softly upon her arm.

"Take comfort," he said, "I have formed a plan for

your little girl, your Hester. She shall be mine. I will adopt her as my own until Hester herself can take charge of her."

"What is it you said?" asked Rose, incredulously; and raising her tearful face to look at him.

"I will regard your little Hester as my own child," he answered; "I am rich enough for that. You need not trouble yourself any more about her. She shall be my charge."

"But you live here in Little Aston," she said, her face still clouded with incredulity and anxiety, "you cannot bring her here. I would rather she died, the poor little thing, than ever see her father. She believes her father is dead, and in heaven—in heaven! Oh! I could not bear that she should ever know different. No, no; you cannot take charge of my little Hester, living here."

"Has she been happy where she is!" asked Carl.

"Oh! as happy as a little creature can be at school," said Rose, "but not as happy as she was with the good sisters. She has been there four years, and she knows no other kind of life. Only if her bills are not paid, I know what sort of taunts she will have to bear, and that makes me suffer. I earn all the money I can by sewing, but I do not quite keep myself; and how can I get enough to pay for her? And she wants new frocks and other clothes, and shoes. What can I do? Whatever can I do?"

She dropped her face again helplessly upon her hands, while Carl deliberated once more.

There seemed nothing he could do, except engage to pay the expenses of the forlorn, deserted little child, in her dreary school-home in London. It was true that he could not bring her to Little Aston, as in the first moment he had thought of doing, where she could be placed under Annie's care. The secret was not his own; it belonged to

the poor mother, who dreaded that the child should ever discover she had a father not in heaven. He did not even know whether it would be well to confide it to Hester; it would only add to her cares and difficulties. There was nothing to be done at present but to pay the debts already accumulated, and to leave the child at school, until he could see more plainly how he could make her life happier.

"I suppose we must leave her where she is," he said, as soon as he had come to this conclusion, "but if you will give me the address I will write to-night, and ask the mistress of the school to send her account to me. You shall see it, and tell me if it is correct, and then you need feel no further uneasiness. I came in order to see if I could give you any comfort, any help. I am very glad to do this."

He spoke in a tone of such heart-felt sympathy, that Rose could not doubt his sincerity. She flung herself on her knees before him, and when he would not suffer her to kiss his hands, she sank down on the ground, crouching at his feet. He raised her up, spoke a few kindly words to her, and then, seeing her agitation and trouble to be very great, he left her and groped his way across the dark court into John Morley's house.

He did not see Hester again alone, for it was tea-time, and she was making tea for her father in his gloomy room, which, for this one hour of the day, put on a more home-like aspect than at any other. Carl sat down with them, and lost no movement or glance of Hester's, though his eyes were seldom turned directly to her. A strong current of happiness ran through his whole being. There was a mutual secret and a mutual sympathy between them which must draw them very closely together in the future. John Morley asked him some indifferent question with regard to the poor woman he had been to visit, and he answered at random, his thoughts being fixed upon Hester. A gleam of

light, strangely sweet and sad, flashed across John Morley's grey face, as he looked up at hearing Carl's irrelevant answer, and saw him gazing at his daughter. There was no one else in Hester's little world, thought the father, whom she could marry.

A little later John Morley accompanied Carl to chapel, where there was a meeting, and walking side by side with him, put his arm affectionately through his. **A rare token of friendship from a man like him.**

CHAPTER XLVIII.

HERESY.

THERE were, however, rocks ahead in the hitherto smooth tack of Carl's life-voyage. He had been sensitive enough to feel an immediate change in the atmosphere of Aston Court, and he had attributed it to his own confession to Miss Waldron. But there was also rankling in Mr. Waldron's mind the suspicion, introduced to it by his daughter, that Carl had dealt unfairly with regard to Hester and Robert. It happened, naturally, that he visited John Morley's house more than usual after his first interview with Rose ; and the church was at no loss to account for it. Many a hint and allusion among the chapel people as to their young minister soon needing a house of his own, made Mr. Waldron wince sharply. He was convinced that Robert would never stay in the neighborhood should Hester become Carl's wife. Without intention, he grew cool towards him, and Carl was not slow in withdrawing from his former familiar intimacy with his patron.

But there was a more perilous rock ahead than the mere darkening of the great man's countenance. It will be difficult to give Miss Waldron credit for conscientiousness in what is about to be narrated, but it is necessary to do so. Like the best and wisest among us, she was self-deceived at times, and saw through the fog of her own feelings. She believed herself to possess a keen eye for the faintest speck of heresy. To her purged sight it was needful that the sun

itself should shine without spots. Now, like most young men of his age and genius, Carl's creed was not as firmly rooted and as artistically pruned as that of elder men; though he had gone diligently through a system of divinity, and knew very well how to argue for the peculiar tenets of their sect. But Miss Waldron discovered traces of suspicious latitudinarianism, which it was not difficult to account for. Carl had German proclivities and relations, for had he not been positively named after a German friend and fellow-student of his fathers', who was probably inoculated with German errors? It became her painful duty to the church to point out these erroneous tenets. If rationalism found its way among the simple flock at Little Aston, she and her father alone would be responsible.

Among the churches, no burr sticks so close as the charge of heterodoxy. Sunday after Sunday she watched with a sharp eye for Carl's German predilections, and hinted her doubts and objections to her father, till even he, shrewd though he was, began to listen with lessening confidence to his eloquent sermons. Though liberal to an extreme in politics, Mr. Waldron was a strong conservative in religion, and admitted but few to the franchise of the New Jerusalem. He took the alarm himself, and the suspicion spread through the church like a slow fever. It was found out that the younger members of the congregation were asking questions which it was difficult if not impossible to answer. The fledglings, who had nestled contentedly under the safe wings of old Mr. Watson, were beginning to stir and try their own frail pinions. The mere phrase "German rationalism" was a bugbear to the church, though they knew no more of it than of the differential calculus. There was, perhaps, just foothold for the charge of heterodoxy. Carl was at the time crossing the debatable ground which every thoughtful spirit has to traverse, and he needed large charitable

sympathy from his fellow-pilgrims. Many a soul is driven from the fold by the foolish sparrings of its fellows.

It was one Sunday evening, after Carl had seemed to forget the beaten tracks, well trodden by his predecessors, and had ventured upon newer and fresher pasturage for his flock, that Miss Waldron spoke out openly.

"I begin to think," she said, solemnly, "that we should have done better for the church by choosing David Scott. I am sure Carl Bramwell's doctrine is not sound."

"His sermon to-night was very fine," said Mr. Waldron, in a tone of regret.

"But dangerous ; the more dangerous for its eloquence," continued Miss Waldron. "He preached works without faith."

"The other day you said he preached faith without works," observed Robert, with a sneer, partly at his sister, and partly at Carl.

"I am sure I don't know what he believes," she answered, peevishly ; "he teaches first one thing, and then the opposite. All I know is, that the females in my classes are quite unsettled. I have already detected the Socinian heresy in one or two of them."

"My dear," suggested Mr. Waldron, "he cannot be heterodox in every direction."

"I don't know that," she argued ; "when an intellect is once perverted, it runs greedily in the way of any error. But I am in great distress of mind ; and I am sure we ought to call a church meeting about it. An awful responsibility rests upon us ; in one sense the church is in our keeping."

Mr. Waldron mused a little while with an expression of embarrassment and pain upon his face. His daughter had reached this point by little and little, with here a word and there a word, until he was really disturbed about the church ; though he felt an inward shame of his disquietude. The

coolness between himself and Carl had been gradually increasing ; for the latter, with all a young man's dread of sycophancy and servility, had met Mr. Waldron's change of manner with a distance and reserve equal to his own. He had been even a little too independent of his patron in his arrangements with respect to the church ; and Mr. Waldron had felt chafed and angry. He came to the conclusion that a church-meeting would do no harm ; and the responsibility and burden would be partly taken off his shoulders. Carl consented to summon it, but declined to be himself present.

Upon the occasion of this meeting, to the great wonder of the little church, the tall, thin, bent form of John Morley, whose voice had been silent so many years, rose up in its dark corner, and his tones, slow and tardy in their utterance, as that of a man long unused to speech, sounded solemnly through the little chapel.

"You are about to do a great wrong, brethren," he said ; "this pastor of ours is a young man, younger than any man among us. His mind is more active than ours, and more open to mental and spiritual influences. What if he should venture sometimes upon unknown seas? I know him well, and I can answer for him that there is no desire in his heart so strong as to know the truth ; and that the truth should make him free. We do not ourselves know all the truth ; we can but make guesses at it. And shall not he make his guesses also! Even if he were in error, would it not be wiser, better,—more like Christ, who did not cast away Peter, though he said to Him, 'Thou savorest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men ;'—would it not be more like Him to restore our pastor, in a spirit of meekness from any error into which he may have fallen? I say, brethren pray for him as much and as often as ye please ; but do not set upon him, in the very outset

of his career, the brand of heresy. You may make him what he is not,—a heretic.”

John Morley sat down, and Hester crept closer to him, and pressed his hand tightly in her own.

Miss Waldron also moved nearer her father's side, and pushed him on with her elbow. She was pale, and her lips moved with nervous twitchings. She was not at all sure what her father would say ; and every eye was riveted upon him. The decision rested with him alone.

“Brethren,” he said, “you have heard brother Morley state that we are all of us, mere guessers at truth. What? Have we not then the open Bible in our hands? And have we not, for our better instruction in its mysteries, the Commentary and Institutes of Calvin? Have we not a carefully digested system of theology, in which our students are well grounded before they are sent forth as the commissioned overseers of God's people? The best thing that brother Morley can say is that our pastor is making guesses at truth! But can we trust our souls to a guesser only? Is not that like the blind leading the blind? True, he is younger than we are ; but we look upon him as one wiser, better instructed than we ; one whose whole time and talents are consecrated to the study of religious truths. We bring our souls, weary and fretted with the world, to be comforted and nourished by him, whom we set apart from the vexations of worldly labor. We commit our youth, and our children to his teaching. How easily could he insinuate error into our unguarded souls and the souls of our children. There is danger for a church when its leader and teacher is no more than a guesser at truth.”

Mr. Waldron said a good deal more than he intended ; but it was so long since he had had the chance of a wrestle with John Morley, that he warmed to it, as the heart of an old soldier warms at the voice of a foe. He expected his

speech to bring his opponent to his feet again, as in old times ; but John Morley sat still, his white head bowed, and his face turned away from his brethren : the brief flame, having flickered, had gone out. The next speaker followed emphatically upon Mr Waldron's side ; and at the close of the meeting, which lasted double its ordinary time, it was all but formally decided that Carl was too deeply tainted with heresy to be fit for the pastorate of the small church at Little Aston.

CHAPTER XLIX.

OUT OF THE DARK.

IT would be utterly impossible to describe the agony and dismay of Carl at the conduct of his church in bringing the charge of heresy against him. They pronounced him to have been found wanting in the most vital point. He had given himself with unchecked ardor and vigor to his work. He had felt a glow of inextinguishable exultation in calling himself a Christian minister. He had thrown over all the littlenesses and follies and blemishes of his church a glow of spiritual interest and romance. He had clipped for it the wings of his ambition, which had been stretched for a higher sphere than Little Aston. He had thought of it, cared for it, dreamed for it, studied it, as a young husband cares of and studies his bride. And now! Scarcely a year had elapsed since he had espoused her in all her meanness and poverty, and she had turned against him as one unfit to be her head.

There was not even a division of opinion in the church. One and all had followed in the wake of Mr. Waldron, who had been betrayed into a course from which he could not retreat with dignity; though he longed for the church to assert its own independence, and to drive him from his position. On the contrary, everybody agreed with him. He even began to suspect that his daughter had been using him as a cat's-paw; and in his quickened shrewdness he fancied the offence Carl was being punished for was very

far removed from heresy. It weighed very heavily with him, that the young minister should quit his first charge with the stigma of unsound doctrine attaching to him.

For it soon came to that. Carl, with the generous impatience of youth, would not stay with his church if it turned cold ungrateful looks upon him. He sent in his resignation, in a letter written in bitter sorrow and hot anger, as a lover might bid farewell to a faithless mistress. He must leave Annie and Grant, he must leave even Hester. He must throw himself afresh upon the world, dishonored by no slight dishonor. From his earliest boyhood he had been set apart and trained for the ministry, to which his father and his father's father had belonged, and now he was declared unworthy of his office! He did not know how to turn himself to any other pursuit. It was even possible, for any calamity seemed possible after this, that he might come to be in want of bread. The prospect, looked at in the brightest light, was but dismal: looked at from the sombre gloom of his spirits, it was desperate. With the loss of his reputation for orthodoxy, he seemed to have lost everything.

The church was then meeting for the reception of his resignation, and he was deeply sunk in melancholymusing, when his study-door softly opened, and he could scarcely give credence to his own senses. There stood John Morley, breathless and palpitating, with an air of self-amazement and fear upon his face. He looked in at Carl, as if he were in a dream; but the gripe he gave to his outstretched hand was anything but doubtful or nerveless.

"I could not stay after your letter was read," said John Morley. "Do you know all that is likely to befall you? Do you know what reports will go out against you to the other churches?"

"I foresee all," answered Carl, with a profound sigh, which was almost a sob.

"Are you prepared to enter some other denomination?" he asked. "You would be welcomed among many; but they would not be the people of your fathers."

"No," he answered, with an aspect of sad resolution. "I cannot change the creed I received from my forefathers. I must remain among my own people, even if I cease to be a minister among them."

"Then what will become of you? how will you live?" asked John Morley.

"God knows," said Carl, almost with a smile.

"My boy," continued John Morley, sadly, "ten years ago I was comparatively a rich man, and I wish I were so still, for your sake. But I have few possessions now except debts and my Hester. Still, give an ear to me. If you should be put out of the ministry, there could be no occupation more suited to you than mine. You may be a student and a scholar, if you are a bookseller. Nay, you may yourself become a writer of books. Come to me, then. My business was once good enough, and in young hands, like yours, it would thrive again. Do not despise it, Carl. It seems to me as if you might lift me out of my Slough of Despond. But this is only if you should fail in getting another charge. I trust another pulpit will soon be given to you."

John Morley had spoken hurriedly and stammeringly, and Carl had kept silent in amazement. But when he ended, and stretched out his trembling hand to him, Carl caught it eagerly, and bowed down his head upon it to hide his tears.

"Despise it!" he cried, "your home would be like a heaven to me. You love me then? You would take me as your son?"

"With all my heart, my boy," said John Morley, laying his other hand tenderly upon the young man's head.

"And I accept your offer with all my heart," said Carl, after a brief silence. "You know I believe myself called by God to this ministry; but if He gives me no place in another church, I will return here gladly, as freely to you as to a father. We will confront the world together; and it will go hard with me indeed, if I do not win bread for you and Hester, as well as for myself."

A brighter look was upon John Morley's face than Carl had ever seen there. He asked him to walk home with him, as if he shrank from traversing a second time the streets to which he had been so long a stranger; and Carl accompanied him in a trance of mingled joy and sadness. The dark gables of John Morley's house, standing out against the darkness of the sky, possessed a new beauty for him. Even the dismal sitting-room, with its worn-out furniture, had a glory about it. He could very well pass a blissful life here with Hester. The future was no longer so dreary and blank to him; for if he were compelled to relinquish the lawful ambition of his calling, here would be his happiness as well as scope for his scholarly pursuits. He was already painting the coming years in bright colors, while he watched John Morley light his lamp, when he saw him casting an anxious and nervous glance at the black panes of the uncurtained window.

"Carl," he whispered, as if fearful of being overheard by some one without. "I have a fancy some nights of a face which looks in upon me out of the dark. I have never spoken of it to Hester, lest a child like her should be frightened. But look now at yonder corner."

Carl looked earnestly, and detected in the thick darkness of the night, the wan outline of Rose's face, far enough from the casement to be only a dim and indistinct sketch.

But it was there, with far-off eyes, gazing in upon her husband. A thrill of dread and compassion for them both ran through him. If John Morley should only resolve to verify for himself the reality of this haunting face, what would happen? He fixed his eyes more keenly upon the apparition, and advanced a step or two nearer the window, and it vanished suddenly into the darker shades of the night.

"Do you see anything?" asked John Morley eagerly.

"There is nothing," answered Carl, the prevarication jarring upon his delicate sense of truth; "but you should have a curtain to this window. These fancies are not good for you."

"Nay, I like the night to stare in upon me," he replied gloomily. "I wonder, at times, if it sees any creature as like itself as I am; neither sun nor stars in many days appearing and no small tempest lying on me. No, no. Let that face, as well as the night, stare in to see what sort of a wretch lives here."

He sat down on his own chair, with his grey face half turned from the window, and the full light of the lamp falling upon it. He sank into a long, dreamy fit of reverie, while Carl watched anxiously the black, blank casement beyond him. The pale shadow of John Morley's wife looked in no more; but Carl, before going away, resolved to warn Rose of the risk she ran in thus venturing to gaze in upon the hearth she had forsaken and lost forever.

CHAPTER L.

ANOTHER CALL.

MR. WALDRON'S first action, after having performed the painful duty of reading to the church Carl's resignation, was to write at once to Dr. Hervey, the principal of the college, and entreat him to do all in his power to procure the young discarded minister a new charge. He found it a very difficult matter to explain his own conduct ; but what is there that cannot be explained, almost to satisfaction, when it is a self-explanation which is given? Carl's heresy dwindled down into certain refinements of theological and metaphysical distinctions too abstruse for the simple church, which could only digest the food of babes. Nothing would give Mr. Waldron greater pleasure than to see Carl in a position where his active and energetic mind could find more congenial hearers ; and if the doctor could hit upon any plan for advancing his interests, he would do anything in his power to further them.

In the meantime, David Scott came down to take Carl's place in the pulpit, and to be patronized by Miss Waldron ; while he stood on one side, and saw David drive away in her carriage, and himself only acknowledged by a freezing bow, strangled in its birth. Carl laughed at times, and chafed at times ; and then repented of both natural emotions, with a sincere effort to gain the mastery over nature. Annie felt the same, and yielded without any attempt at all to conquer herself ; she only longed for some opportunity

of speaking with feminine fidelity to her former friend. Robert came no more to Grant's house, though he was cordial with Grant himself, when he met him.

It became a question with Carl whether he should not at once accept John Morley's offer. He had so modest an opinion of himself that it did not seem beneath him to condescend to the business of a bookseller; and he spent the greater portion of his time in John Morley's house, with the idea that he was learning something of it. He drew closer to every member of the isolated household. Once again, as she went about the house, Hester sang gravely, but sweetly, songs which stirred his heart with the most delicious tremor. A blessed calm visited the desolate home. Even John Morley's worn face and sunken eyes seemed to catch a reflection of the pervading peace; as if he had at last consented to a truce with his tormenting memories. Carl began to think that his pastorate was there, and that the little flock given into his care numbered only John Morley and Hester and the lost and banished one, hidden from the sight of all men.

But before long, in the midst of this slumber of ambition, came a more important call than before for Carl. There was a great spring gathering of their denomination in London, and Mr. Waldron was to take the chair at the chief public meeting. In his palmiest days at Aston Court, Carl would never have dreamed of being present as a speaker at this meeting, where the greatest of their preachers would occupy the platform. But his friend Dr. Hervey, who had been one of the appointed speakers, was seized with a sudden illness a day or two before, and sent for Carl. He told him what he wished to say and started him off at once for London.

Carl achieved one of those brilliant and dangerous successes which occasionally fall to the lot of young orators.

He took the meeting by storm, and made every speech succeeding his fall flat upon the excited minds of the audience. Miss Waldron, who held a prominent place on the platform, drew her veil over her face and wept some of the bitterest tears of her life. When the etiquette of the meeting permitted it, all the speakers crowded round Carl, whose father had been known to most of them, and congratulated him upon his triumph. Mr. Waldron shook hands with him publicly, and was loudly cheered for doing so. There was no longer a fear for Carl's future ; and his heterodoxy was forgiven and forgotten on the spot.

Carl's absence from Little Aston, which he had supposed would be only for three or four days, prolonged itself into weeks. Sunday after Sunday he was called upon to supply some pulpit in London and the neighborhood. It ended in his being invited to become co-pastor of one of the first and richest churches in London, whose minister was beginning to fail under the burden of his work. He accepted the offer only on condition that, for six months he should be among them as a candidate merely, that they might judge whether he merited the brand of heresy. For it was possible, he said, that his views of truth, differing somewhat from the traditional theology, might fall under their censure, as at Little Aston.

He went home at last, but only for a few days. There was a conflict in his mind as to whether he should yet utter his love to Hester, or wait until his own future was sure. Unfortunately and unwisely he decided upon keeping silence. He believed that Hester would feel too greatly divided between her duties to her father and Rose, and to him. She had asked him once, in a tone of trouble and supplication, not to let Grant talk any more about her leaving home. It would be impossible to do so, she added, hurriedly, for many years to come, if the time ever came.

Carl's sensitive nature fancied there was a dread in her mind lest he should say anything to disturb her peace; and he resolved to say nothing till he could say all.

Among the farewells he had to take, none were so painful as parting with Rose. Her life was so sad, so solitary, and so peculiar, that it drew his chivalrous and tender heart very closely to her. The bond between them had something of the sacred relationship of a priest towards a penitent, whom he may absolve or condemn. She saw no one else but him and Hester; and she naturally leaned more upon him than upon a fellow-woman. Hester was the daughter of the husband she had betrayed, and she dared not reveal to her all the remorseful memories which oppressed her broken spirit.

"I have something to tell you," said Carl, as the best consolation he could give her when he was about leaving her in circumstances so desolate; "I have seen your child, your little Hester; and now I am going to live in London, she shall come very often to my house."

"God bless you!" cried Rose, sobbing. "But what is to become of me when you are gone? I feel at times as if I must force my way to my husband, and let him strike me dead if he will. I don't know whether I am doing right to be so near to him without him knowing it."

"You must be patient," said Carl, pitifully; "you must not tempt him to revenge. Do you not know how he nearly murdered Robert Waldron at his own door, and he would have died in the street if my brother Grant had not found him? Do you wish him to be hurried into murder? Be patient, and leave yourself in Hester's hands. She knows her father better than we do, she loves him more; she will not lose the right time, if it ever come, of confessing all to him. Trust yourself to Hester."

"But how can I be patient?" she exclaimed, her pale

face growing paler. "I think day and night that I shall never hear his voice speaking to me again. Perhaps even in heaven, where you tell me there is a place even for me, I shall be nowhere near him ; and it may be that through all eternity I shall never hear him say, ' I forgive you.' Ah ! you cannot tell what it is, you and Hester, who all your lives long have lived as if you looked up into the face of God Himself, and who have no pardon to seek but His, and He has little to forgive. Every night I lie awake and think that death will surely come before I hear him forgive me."

"These are only fancies," said Carl gently ; "you are likely to live many years. Your illness is passing away, Grant says. But there is a nearer hope for you, perhaps. As soon as I can offer Hester and her father a home with me, I shall ask her to be my wife ; I shall ask her father to give her to me. Do you think they will consent?"

"Consent !" repeated Rose, "she loves you, and he thinks of you as a son, she says."

"Then," continued Carl, his face flushing with anticipated joy ; "as soon as he is happy once more, when a portion of gloom passes away from his life, we can turn his thoughts to you ; and perhaps, who can tell ? your forgiveness may be fuller than we hope for now. Why ! when Hester becomes my wife the whole of life will be turned to gladness."

He felt as if the whole world would be made partakers of the joy he looked forward to. At the least all *his* world would be illuminated and warmed by it ; and in the new summer which would begin for John Morley it might not be impossible to bring about a perfect reconciliation between him and Rose. The glow of his hope fell for a brief season upon her heart, but it died away, and left a more chilly darkness behind it, when Carl was gone, and she knew that it would be very long before she could see him again.

At the request of David Scott, and with the hearty approbation of Mr. Waldron, Carl preached once more to his first church before leaving Little Aston for London. He knew it well now, with all its foibles and littlenesses. It was no longer an assembly of angels. But it was with a larger charity that he bade it a last farewell. It had already repented of its unfaithfulness and unkindness, and looked back regretfully on its short-lived union with its eloquent young pastor ; but the tie had been broken by itself, and could never be re-knit. Mr. Waldron felt it, and did not hold his head as erect, or sing with so much energy and freedom as usual ; while his daughter listened for the last time to Carl with conflicting emotions of exultation and chagrin.

CHAPTER LI.

AT JOHN MORLEY'S DOOR.

FOR John Morley there had been a brief interval of interest in outer things, and of distraction from his own morbid broodings, during the last few weeks of Carl's residence in Little Aston ; but as soon as he was gone, and the old routine closed in upon the house again, the faint throb of quicker vitality died away, and left him more dead than before. Even the fresh enthusiasm and hope of Carl's nature, tinged as they were with the buoyancy of a spirit which had not yet come into very close contact with the real world, had added a deeper shade to his disgust of life. He had looked back, and seen, through Carl's eyes, the fair visions which had attended his own early days ; and the realities which had met him, in the march of the years, only grew more intolerable in their burden of shame. The malady of John Morley, so long and carefully fostered, had reached a point where it was beyond his own power, or that of any man, to heal. Grant, who had cherished some hope, while Carl was in daily intercourse with him, gave up the case in despair. More closely than ever John Morley confined himself to his gloomy and unwholesome parlor, more unwholesome for his soul than his body, and there brooded over the dim memories of his grief.

But they were not dim just then. As if Carl had sharpened in every respect the keen sword of the spirit, John Morley's brain presented to him clearer and more poignant

recollections of the past. It seemed at times as if he almost saw the face of his faithless wife, and caught the echo of her voice somewhere upon the very confines of his ear. There was a subtle, mysterious feeling of her presence close at hand, haunting him with an indefinable terror. The closed room overhead did not seem uninhabited, though he could hear neither voice nor step in it. Once before entering his bedroom he stole cautiously to the locked door, and listened through the empty key-hole, if there were any movement within. No grave could be more silent, and he retreated shuddering. In his chamber he could not banish the impalpable presence. He felt that he had but to strain his sight a little, and listen with a more attentive ear, and he should succeed in seeing and hearing this shadowy visitant. But dimness of sight, and dullness of hearing must be closing in upon him, in his premature old age ; and there was a film, a mist, a nameless terror, darkening his mind. His nights were sleepless, and his days fuller of poisoned thoughts. He was like a man smitten with disease, who counts the moments of his fleeting life by the sickly throbbing of his pulse.

Hester was only partly aware of this aggravation of her father's malady. She had more to think of than in the days when she had him alone to study. There was Rose, and there was Annie, who was more warmly cultivating her friendship. Carl, too, claimed a large share of her thoughts. Nor was Robert Waldron forgotten ; that would have been impossible. The recollection of him crossed her mind often, and always with a pensive tinge of sadness, which did not amount to sorrow or regret yet which borrowed a shade from both. Carl was gone away, without speaking any sure words of love, and she saw him no more. Robert had paid to her the greatest and deepest homage by which any man can testify his devotion ; and it is not in

the nature of a woman to hate or despise the man who truly loves her, whatever may be the character of his faults. He was still at Aston Court. She had seen him, and he had seen her twice, as he was passing Grant's house, and looked up to its windows. She heard very much of him through Lawson's mother. He looked pale and suffering; Madame assured her that he was desolated. Among her many other thoughts Hester gave a place, a poor paltry place, Robert would have considered it, to him. It was impossible he should ever rival Carl; but for very pity's sake, and because with Rose always in her mind he could not be far off, Hester often thought of Robert Waldron.

To Robert himself, the departure of Carl and the assurance of Madame Lawson that he had not proposed for Hester, brought a new hope. He knew the flatteries and adulations, so difficult to resist, which would wrap about Carl upon his introduction into the religious world of London; and he trusted somewhat to their seductions to make him forgetful of the grave, quiet girl at Little Aston. If Carl only withdrew from the field, he could not believe that she would persist in choosing poverty, and debt, and the increasing difficulties of her position, to the bright future he had to offer. He possessed the faculty of burying in oblivion what he did not wish to remember, and he had forgotten the singular solemnity of Hester's rejection of his suit. The fact that she had refused him remained in his memory only as being possibly the caprice of a girl, under Carl's ascendancy. He blamed his father for hurrying him into a premature avowal, which would have been better timed by being deferred a little; but his withered hope bloomed again. There would be need of still more delicate management than before; but after all, in spite of all, his little Hetty should one day be mistress of Aston Court.

"What news of Little Aston?" asked Robert of Grant, one evening, with the carelessness of a man to whom so small a place could yield no news of any interest.

"John Morley is dangerously ill," answered Grant, very gravely.

"Ill! good God!" cried Robert, "what will become of Hester."

"He is not beyond hope yet," said Grant, "and I shall do my utmost to save him; but his constitution is terribly weakened. To my knowledge, he has never turned the corner of the street since I have been here, except once to see Carl."

"Is he in bed?" asked Robert.

"To be sure, and the shop shut up altogether," he answered. "It has never done him any good; he is about as fit for business as you are. The place looks more dismal than ever; what with that room which is never opened, where the shutters are falling to pieces,—"

"What room?" inquired Robert, as Grant hesitated.

"Oh, a drawing-room or something," he added, "which they say is never opened. But I am in a hurry. I promised Hester to sit up with her father to-night."

Grant left Robert with fresh food for thought. He knew very little personally of the man whom he had injured; years ago he had been Rose's husband, now he was Hester's father. The news of his illness affected him chiefly as it touched his own purposes. He was soon considering Hester's position should her father die, and how it would affect him. He flattered himself that Hester's reluctance to receive his suit arose partly from regard to her father; but his death would remove this stumbling-block; nay, might become a stepping-stone to the attainment of his end. She would be left homeless, penniless, and friendless; and it was incredible to suppose that she

would again refuse the lot he would offer her. In his idle and luxurious worldliness, he could not comprehend the possibility of Hester choosing rather a life of difficulty and trial than his own lot of untroubled abundance of all things.

He had strolled on unthinkingly until he reached the entrance of the town, just as the clock of the old church struck ten. The streets lay before him, with lights twinkling fitfully in many of the windows. There would be no danger now in walking once again under the walls of Hester's home. He passed on to it, with the impatient swiftness of one who has been long denied a pleasure. The gloom of the evening was deeper there, for the street was narrow and the houses high on each side. He crossed over to the opposite causeway, and looked up to the second story. He had done so often in the old times to see if any light shone in Rose's pleasant sitting-room; but the shutters of that window were closed. In the next casement, however, glimmered a wan and sickly gleam, the beacon of illness, the pale watch-fire, where Hester, solitary and uncomforted, kept watch over the inroads of death. Why did his treacherous fancy mingle the images of Hester and Rose? He had diligently rooted from his memory all unpleasant and disquieting reminiscences. Yet now, standing in the dark, opposite the house, and looking up to the windows, he felt himself the boy he had been eleven years ago. A boy only. He caught again the oft repeated apology for the past. It was as a boy he had loved and tempted Rose; it was as a man he loved and honored Hester.

He stood in the quiet street some minutes, no passer-by coming to disturb him. At length he heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and felt that it was time to move on. He traversed the whole length of the street, and then

retraced his steps past John Morley's door. Was he in a dream to-night? Was he the boy of three-and-twenty; or the man of thirty-four years of age, weary, disenchanted, with a pricking goad in his conscience which he could not altogether pluck out? To see Hester, only for a moment, would allay this fever of his spirit; and what would be more natural than for him to testify his concern for her, and her father? There could be neither harm nor danger in simply knocking at the door, and asking the servant how John Morley was. Perhaps Hester herself might answer his knock; as he could remember her doing once many years before. He called back her image to his mind; a grave, sweet, simple child, who hailed his coming with a demure rapture of delight. If he had only foreseen into what a womanhood this childhood was about to expand! With a profound sigh, Robert Waldron set his foot upon John Morley's threshold, and knocked a low uncertain knock at his door.

CHAPTER LII.

ON THE OTHER SIDE.

WHEN Rose Morley heard of her husband's dangerous illness, she implored Hester to suffer her to see him at once, lest he should die without forgiving her. But his malady was more of the mind than the body, and Grant forbade any kind of agitation for him. John Morley's brain was at work with too busy and too perilous an activity. He was neither insensible nor delirious; but from hour to hour his thoughts were flashing, with lightning speed, over all the events of his past life; and his tongue, so long reticent, read aloud the secret records. It was a fever, but not a fever of the blood. The spirit, long kept in check, was at last avenging itself upon its tyrant. John Morley, lying almost motionless upon his bed, with his meagre face and burning eyes turned towards the listener at his side, poured out restlessly the pent-up emotions of his years of silence.

To speak to him of Rose, in this strange fire and fever of his memory, would have been madness. The only persons he admitted near to him were Hester and Lawson; and to them his tongue ran on fast of all his love to her, and of all the torture of despair and shame he had suffered for her. Her name was always upon his lips. There was something of a solemn humiliation in this spectacle of a soul, forced at last to make itself known to some other human soul. Neither Hester nor Lawson answered him,

and he did not need an answer. The fire within his was consuming him until he spoke with his lips ; that was all. They had only to stand by and listen.

It was difficult to Hester to turn from her father to Rose with gentleness. She began to question whether the sin she had committed did not shut her out from all claim to her husband's pardon. When Rose demanded an entrance to his room, with an importunity almost angry, she replied by telling her all that her father had said. Until that moment Rose had not felt the fulness of the wrong she had inflicted upon a nature like John Morley's. She could scarcely hope any more ; but she would minister to him afar off, and Hester, sorry for her in her heart, gave her permission to help in the additional labor of the house.

The servant was gone to bed, and Rose was sitting up by the kitchen fire, waiting to let in Grant, when Robert Waldron's low knock reached her ear. She was scarcely afraid of being recognized now ; especially in the dim light kept burning in the entrance. Yet she crept slowly and tremblingly to the door, and paused with her fingers upon the handle before turning it. Who could it be on the other side ? And what errand brought them there ? It was not Grant, for he was to have tapped softly on the window, lest the patient should have fallen asleep. Her heart throbbed, and her lips felt dry. But she fancied the person outside was about to give a second knock, and she threw the door open quickly and fully.

For a minute or two Rose Morley and Robert Waldron stood face to face in silence, feeling as if they had met in another world. Yet it was the old place, the door she had opened to him so often, the threshold he had crossed with guilty feet. There was the difference only 'twixt now and then ; but the wofulness of the change was in

Rose. He stood there, still handsome, almost young, with the air and mien of a man with whom all the world was pleased ; and she confronted him, motionless, nearly lifeless, a faded, withered woman, bowed down with the world's censure. He closed his eyelids as if to shut out a vision so repugnant to him ; but Rose, with eyes that would not blanch, gazed steadfastly and mournfully into his face.

"Hush!" she whispered, in a guilty tone, and with a gesture of silence, such as she might have used in the former days, "he is sleeping perhaps. Follow me softly. There is nobody to see you."

He would have given worlds to escape from this interview, yet he had no power to resist. He followed her reluctantly, watching her now with keen eyes, which would not allow him to pass over any change in her. It was the same Rose, but with no more bloom or sweetness. The poor emaciated hand was trembling, the face was marked and sallow, the slender and graceful figure meagre and bent. Her eyes only were the eyes of Rose, though their deep blue was troubled with shame. She was leading him through the house, and across the court, when the flame of the candle she carried flickered in the wind ; he could see how transparent her hand was as she curved it round the flame. Where could she be taking him? He climbed a steep staircase after her, and the light fell upon the swarthy leaves of ivy about the door ; and then he remembered the melancholy little room opposite Hester's window, which had once oppressed and fascinated his attention. Had Rose been in the house at the time when John Morley nearly murdered him? Was it possible that she had even then been concealed so near to him, in a refuge of which he could never have dreamed?

This refuge was a mere, bare, comfortless cell in his

eyes. The poor pieces of furniture, provided by Hester with so much difficulty, looked mean and scanty. The two chairs, the table, the pallet-bed, a book or two upon the narrow window-sill, a basket of work,—this was all the room contained. The walls were dark with smoke, and the low roof was not ceiled. There was not a loft over the stables at Aston Court which was not better fitted for a human dwelling than this. Yet this was the poor shelter to which Rose Morley had been brought—by him.

He had not spoken yet; he could not speak. Could this monstrous dream be by any chance a reality? His conscience also was so diligently at work among the records of the past, turning back to old leaves which had long since been pressed down, that he was unconscious of his own dumbness before this awful apparition of his first love. If she had kept silence, he would have sat mute for hours, gazing at her in blank bewilderment.

“You have found me out,” she murmured at last, in a voice of fear, “and there is no help for me but to throw myself upon your mercy. Do not drive me from here; do not betray me. Nobody knows I am here, except Hester and Carl Bramwell. If you ever had any love for me, leave me here in peace.”

“Here!” he repeated, casting round the place a glance of disgust.

“Yes, here,” she added, vehemently. “Why, it is a hundred times better than the place to which I might have fallen through you. Do you know who has saved me and gives me now this refuge? It is Hester. But for the remembrance of her, the good little child I had forsaken, I might have fallen lower than I did. I owe all to Hester, my little Hetty.”

Her voice, broken and trembling, fell into sobs, until she could speak no more. The name of Hester brought

Robert back to the present, and his deep absorbing love for her, so widely different to his fitful and poisoned passion for Rose. What influence had her presence there upon Hester with regard to him?

"How long have you been here?" he asked, in lowered tones, as if afraid of being overheard. "I have sought for you every where. I could endure to think of you in poverty, without a home, and without friends. Why did you never let me know where you were? It was cruel to me."

Still thinking of himself, he asked this last question in a tone of so much tenderness, that Rose trembled and flushed a little. A last gleam of the good-tempered vanity of girlish days flashed across her saddened heart.

"Why have you never married, Robert?" she asked. "I could have been happier and more contented if you had been married. Have you never loved any one—" but me? she would have added, but her lips only moved, no sound came through them.

"Yes," he answered, briefly; "I have loved."

"And would she not marry you?" asked Rose, as soon as the spark of jealousy which his words had kindled had died away. "Is it possible that any woman could say No to you?"

"I love Hester," he said again, with the short, sharp utterance of one in great anguish of mind.

"Hester!" she echoed, "Hester!"

She could say no more; but she sat silent for a few minutes, thinking of what might have been had she but resisted temptation eleven years before. She saw herself John Morley's honored and happy wife, the wife of a prosperous and happy man, the mother of Hester, about to become the mistress of Aston Court. A phantasmagoria of brilliant scenes, in which she played a prominent part,

passed before her. The life that would have been but for her sin, was a hundred-fold better suited to her than the one she had chosen for herself.

"Oh, Robert!" she cried. "What can be done?"

"Nothing!" he said, in an accent of bitterness and despair; "nothing! I know now that Hester could no more love me than an angel could come down from heaven to me. How could she, having you before her eyes?"

He had almost told her that his chief hope had been to discover that she was dead, but he stopped himself in time. It was not in his nature to hate her, as some men hate the woman they have fancied they loved. He was sorry for her, but he was still more sorry for himself.

"Robert," said Rose, "we neither of us knew what we were doing, when we sinned against a man like John Morley. It has been well-nigh the death of his soul, as well as mine. But I think now, I am a better woman than I was then. Look away from me, look away from me. I wish to tell you what I think God has done for me, and I cannot bear your eyes to look into mine while I speak of Him."

She was silent again for a moment or two, sitting before him, with bended head and closed eyelids, as if searching into her own soul with a keen and unsparing scrutiny. His eyes were riveted upon her in spite of her appeal. A feeble smile played once more about her pale lips, and her eyebrows expanded as if some pleasant thought had come to her amid all the pitiless shame and trouble of her interview with him. She was once more something like the Rose he had known.

"I believe," she said, softly and solemnly, "that He has forgiven my sin, for the sake of His Son. I believe that when the woman, who was a sinner, stood at the feet of Jesus, weeping and washing His feet with her tears, He

saw me there ; and it was of me, as well as of her, He said, ' Her sins, which are many, are forgiven.' I believe that."

She raised her eyes to him, with a serene and hopeful light in their blue depths. Yet even as he dared to look into them for a moment, the tears came across them and dimmed them.

"But my husband," she said, "does not forgive me. He has treasured up all our sins, and now he is counting them over one by one, while he is perhaps dying. Do you know that he recollects each day as if it were only a week ago, and he keeps on saying, 'On such a morning he came here, and I heard Rose singing to him in the drawing-room ;' or 'Such a night I found him here when I came home from chapel.' Oh, it is horrible ! He must hate us with a terrible hatred. If he should be lost, it is you and I who have brought his soul to ruin."

"No, no. He is a good man," muttered Robert.

"He was a good man," she continued mournfully. "He was so good himself that he thought no evil of you or me, though he took so much notice of all we did. But all these years our crime has come between him and God. Do you suppose he would not have rejoiced in your death or mine ? They say he was almost guilty of murder. And now he is going to die !"

"He is not going to die, my poor Rose," said Robert.

"I wish I could die for him !" she exclaimed. "I should not be sorry to die. It would be well for me to be out of the world altogether."

There was a passion of mournful pathos in her words, and Robert Waldron could have cast himself at her feet, and hiding his face in her lap, have given way to an agony of grief and repentance. It was true that he had not known till now what he had done. Till this moment he

had not seen the blackness of his transgression. At times when he had been himself low-spirited, or when the even tenor of his comfort and well-being had been infringed, he had experienced what he had been pleased to call repentance. But it was now, looking at Rose and thinking of John Morley counting over his wrongs perhaps in the very hour of death, that his real remorse began. There stole a subtle and fine sense of his speechless anguish over Rose.

"I thought never to let you know," she said, "but now I see you again—it must be for the last time—I cannot help telling you. I have a child."

"A child!" he repeated.

"Yes," she said, believing she was giving him the only consolation in her power. "You shall see her some day. I thought you should never, never know; but perhaps it would be wrong to keep her all to myself. She thinks her father is dead and in heaven; you must never tell her different. She is about as old as Hester was when I was married. You remember little Hetty?"

Remember her! He had done nothing else these months past. There was no consolation or relief in the thought of their child to him as there was to Rose; it only deepened the heavy cloud which hung over him.

"I have called her Hester," said Rose, after a pause, for he had not answered her last question. Robert bowed his face upon his hands and groaned. This then was the Hester who was to belong to him.—his own child, who was never to know him as her father. But for Hester Morley, grave and gentle and sweet, with all the simple grace which satisfied his taste, the innocent and saintly soul which would have helped him to save his own unstable soul,—this Hester was lost to him forever by an irrevocable forfeit.

"My punishment is greater than I can bear," he cried, bitterly.

"No," she said, "your punishment is not so great as mine. Think of it. You are rich and honored, and no one casts a stone at you ; while I am a beggar at my husband's door, and he does not know that I am fed by his hand. If he knew, he would fling me as a worthless thing into the street, where every one who passed by would revile me. Yet I think our sin was equal. But I don't know. No ; it was more evil in me than in you. Let my punishment remain. I deserve it all."

Robert Waldron scarcely heard her. The sound of her words passed through his brain without making any impression there. This woman beside him, who had laid her thin chilly fingers upon his hand, had but a small share in his thoughts. He could no longer endure her presence. He must be alone to taste, drop by drop, the dregs of the bitter cup which he had first tasted hastily in his youth. He rose abruptly and said that he must leave her.

"It is the last time you will ever see me," said Rose, calmly.

"No," he answered ; "we must see one another again."

"You do not know what you say," she added. "There is peril in this house for you and for me. It will never happen again that we can meet as we have done now."

She had opened the door, and was holding the light while he prepared to descend the crazy staircase, so shading it with her hand that the rays fell upon him and the steps he had to tread upon, while her own face was in shadow. She glanced round the sombre court for an instant. A light shone in Hester's window opposite, and the face of Lawson pressed eagerly against the panes, watching Robert making his slow and cautious descent. But he had not seen *her* yet. With a smothered cry of dismay she let the candle fall from her trembling hold, and hurrying on

down the familiar staircase, she put her hand upon Robert's arm, and led him in darkness and silence through the house and into the street beyond. "We have been seen," she whispered, at the door. "I do not know what may come of it. Only I would rather die here in my husband's house, than be cast out once more into the world."

He was about to answer her, to utter some words more pitiful and gentle than any that had fallen from his lips during their interview; but Rose drew back and closed the door once more between them. He did not suppose there would be all the difficulty and danger she imagined in seeing her again; but dismissing her easily from his thoughts, he went home, mindful only of Hester and the child that bore her name, with a heart so heavy that it seemed impossible for the weight to be lifted from it by any event of the future.

CHAPTER LIII.

A FRUITLESS EFFORT.

JOHN MORLEY'S illness though dangerous was not of long duration, and he appeared to recover from it perfectly. But the deep fountains of his trouble had been stirred too greatly to subside quickly into their former monotony and stillness. He grew restless and unquiet; the disquietude of a man who is looking for some event to change completely, either for good or ill, the current of his life. In vain Hester sought to soothe this strange mood. Grant bade her desist from all effort to do so. It was, he said, a crisis in his mind's history, from which he might come out a new man, with a hale and happy old age lying before him. There was nothing for them to do but stand aside, and look on at the strange conflict.

"Hester," said John Morley, one evening just before sunset, "bring me my hat. I am going out for a walk."

Hester could scarcely conceal her surprise, but she brought him his hat without venturing a word of comment. He stepped across his threshold, with a dizzy sense of bewilderment, and turned his steps mechanically towards the chapel, feeling his way before him with his stick as if he were blind. The wind played in his long white hair, and breathed coolly upon his fevered face, for there was still a low subtle fever burning in his veins. At the chapel porch, where the doors were closed, he arrested himself, and stood upon the lowest step, looking about him with an

air of confusion and questioning. What had he come here for? What was he doing? Where was he going?

He remained just within the portico for some minutes. He had come to the end of the bound he had set for himself and kept to during many years. Beyond this limit, he could just catch a glimpse of trees, with their green branches waving and beckoning to him with gestures of welcome. He saw the level sunbeams burnishing richly the topmost leaves, and the evening song of the birds reached his ear. He reared his bended figure, and lifted up his snow-white head. Had he been blind and deaf to these things, and was he now going to hear and see once more? Was the invisible Christ touching with a divine finger his ears, his eyes, and saying, "Be open?" Was the hand of Christ about to loose his burden, and take it away from him forever?

He felt the wooing of the gilded branches and the singing of the birds through every nerve; but he could not break through the unseen barrier stretching between him and them, which he had himself erected in his despair. Until this hour he had not wished to pass beyond it. There was the lost paradise, but he had never turned longing eyes upon the cherubim and the flaming sword which kept the gates. He did so now; he desired ardently to cross the boundary; but whenever he thought of quitting the familiar portico, his feeble limbs trembled, and his sight grew dim. He wished he had brought Hester with him, that he might have leaned upon her arm, and gathered courage from the tender serenity of her face. The passers-by stared curiously at him; but they were few, and did not long interrupt his thoughts. Yet he grew ashamed of being seen there; and when some children turned riotously out of the court opposite, he resolved to retrace his steps homeward.

but he went back to his old arm-chair and set a book open before him and ran his paper-knife along the lines, as if, like a child, it was needful to keep the place where he was reading by pointing to it. The depths had closed over him again, after parting and giving him a brief glance of something brighter rising above them. He was laid once more in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps.

What his eyes read he did not know, though the lamp lighted up the page clearly. Hester went in and out, uttering no word to disturb him ; but at last he felt her hand upon his shoulder, and he raised his dim despairing face to hers. Her eyelids were red with many tears, and her lips trembled as she spoke very slowly and distinctly, as though what she was about to say would astonish and perplex him.

"Father," she said, "do you think you could do without me for a day or two? I must go to London."

"To London!" he repeated, yet with no more than a vague, listless surprise, amounting almost to indifference, in his manner.

"Yes," she replied. "I cannot tell you why now, but you shall know some day. Carl has written for me to go there quickly. I must go to-morrow morning."

Her abrupt sentences were spoken with difficulty and deliberation, but he scarcely noticed her agitation. He always left Hester to her own judgment, and he did not think of demanding any explanation from her. The authority of a father over a daughter had never been assumed by him, and he had no energy to assume it now.

"I shall see Carl there, perhaps," she said, as if to reassure herself and him ; "but I shall come home on Monday. I must be home again on Monday. To-morrow is Saturday, you know, so there will be only Sunday between.

He said never a word to Hester when he re-entered ; I have given Jane all the directions she needs, and Lawson's mother will come down to stay with her. You will not see either of them. It will be exactly the same as if I was here, only I shall be away."

She spoke however, in a tone of much trouble and anxiety, and her eyes wore a look of uncertainty.

"I am going to see some one who is ill," she continued, and John Morley shrank painfully from her. "You are willing for me to go? You can trust me to do what is right? You will say, 'God bless you, and go with you'?"

"Ah!" he answered, putting his arm round her neck, and drawing down her face to his, "I could trust you with my own soul, Hester. Do what seems good in your sight, and God bless you and be with you always, my daughter."

"Father," she said eagerly, "I wish I dare tell you all now. Is there anything I must not speak of yet?"

He fell back from her again, holding up his hand, with a gesture of terror. He knew well how he had poured out his heart before her during his illness, but he had drawn into himself once more ; and he could not bear to listen to any reference to the past from her lips.

"Spare me," he entreated, "at least to-day. When you come back,—when you have been to London and seen her, perhaps then—if she is dead—you may tell me all."

Again Hester hesitated. She longed to disburden her mind of the secret which had weighed heavier since Carl left, but she dared not. She saw that her father believed her journey to London was to see Rose, and to see her as one about to die ; and yet there was no softening of his voice or face as he spoke of her. It would be impossible to confess the whole to him at the very moment when she was about to be absent from home. She must wait till the

right time came for her to give him the explanation she had promised. Her absence would be but a short one ; it could be but short, for there was urgent need for her constant presence at **home**.

CHAPTER LIV.

ALONE IN LONDON.

THE cause of Hester's hurried journey to London, was a letter which she had received from Carl, telling her of the existence of Rose's child, who had lately broken a blood-vessel, and was lying in a dangerous condition in her dreary school-home. True to the large pity and tenderness of her nature, Hester at once resolved to go up to London without inflicting this additional pang upon Rose, and see for herself what could be done for the forlorn little creature. The train by which she travelled left Little Aston at midday, but did not reach London until the evening. She had provided herself with the address of a boarding-house kept by a former inhabitant of Little Aston, and had decided to go to it at once for the night. She had Carl's address also, but she could not go to him though her heart sank a little when she found herself alone at the entrance of the busy terminus, with a maze of streets stretching before her. It was Saturday evening, and her unexpected appearance at that hour would embarrass him and disturb his thoughts, set upon the subjects of to-morrow's sermons. To save Carl the mere chance of feeling her presence a distraction, she was willing to encounter any difficulties herself. Besides, she was in the same place with him ; and she had no idea of the extent of the overgrown city. He might be dwelling in any one of these houses which she was passing, and it

might be that his eye would fall upon her, if he chanced to look out through his study-window.

This thought caused Hester to slacken her quick footsteps, and to tread the crowded pavements with more leisure,—the leisure of a half-born hope. From time to time she inquired the way, and found herself more and more entangled in the busy streets. To call a cab would have been simply impossible to the country girl. But as long as the light lasted her pleasant thought remained. Twilight would draw Carl to his window to catch the last rays of day. Carl loved the dusk. But then she looked round to see what twilight and dusk were in the streets of London. The lamps were already lit, but there was a thick darkness gathering in the big streets, where their shadows flitted to and fro, which gave her a vague, oppressive perception of the vastness of the place, of the myriads of human souls closely surrounding her, of the great heart of anguish throbbing in the bosom of the city. Hester felt her own heart heaving with a troubled and mysterious sympathy. The tears smarted under her eyelids; and now that Carl's eye could not recognize her in the growing darkness, she drew her veil over her face and quickened her wearied footsteps.

She reached her destination safely, but worn-out and foot-sore. It was a dingy house in one of those old inns which have now disappeared from Holborn. She entered under a deep archway, shut in at night by large doors and kept by a watchman. Solemn silence reigned inside, and the sky lay low and flat across the roofs of the buildings, which rose to four and five stories. The watchman pointed out the house she wanted, and in a few minutes Hester was received and welcomed with something more than the usual hospitality of a lodging-house landlady. A guest from Little Aston, as she announced herself, in

trembling accents, was always doubly acceptable ; and very soon she felt more at home than she could have believed possible.

The school where Carl had told her Rose's little girl lived was in a street leading off from Oxford Street ; and Carl's chapel lay beyond, near Hyde Park. Hester lay awake almost all night thinking over her plans, and listening to the solemn boom and hum of the great clock of St. Paul's sounding through the stillness, which seemed to her at last to have fallen over the turmoil of the city. She set out again early in the morning, with minute directions from her landlady. Her rigorous sense of the sanctity of the Sabbath, which was kept with puritanic preciseness by the church at Little Aston, prohibited her entering any conveyance which would have carried her part of the distance. It was, too, an early hour of Sunday morning, one of the quietest hours that ever falls upon those weary streets ; and Hester felt a kind of enjoyment in her novel position—alone in London, and yet near to Carl.

She reached, after a long walk, the street and the house she sought. It was a dull, dirty dwelling, with the words, "Ladies Seminary," upon the wire blinds of the windows in the second floor. It looked a melancholy place to inclose a child's life ; yet it was not more melancholy than the home where she had grown up. Her memory ran rapidly over the past, and her heart melted with tenderness towards the child, who had known the same loneliness and the same desertion from which she had suffered, with the dumb sufferings of childhood. She saw a servant moving about in the underground kitchen, and Hester bent down to the halfopen window, and called to her softly. The girl looked out with the weary air of a person who had been sitting up all night, and came to the area steps.

"You have a child here," she said, "who is very ill. Can you let me see her?"

"I don't know," said the girl, with the caution of a town servant. "Where do you come from?"

"From the country," answered Hester; "a gentleman who comes to see her often, sent for me. His name is Bramwell."

"All right!" said the girl; "he promised to send a nurse, or somebody."

She eyed Hester scrutinizingly, nodded her approbation, and then ascending to the street door, admitted her into a narrow passage.

"How is she?" whispered Hester.

"Oh, she'll die!" answered the girl. "If she don't die, I don't know anything about dying; and I've seen three of my own sisters go out like the snuff of a candle. And such a dear little thing as she is, so loving and patient! I've sat up with her all night, and there's nobody belonging to her to be with her at the last. I don't know whatever the world is made of, or what it was made for, or where we are all going to."

"Dying!" exclaimed Hester.

"Yes," she said, vehemently; "and nobody takes any notice, and nobody believes me. They can't bear the trouble and bother of her dying, and they are afraid of it injuring the school; so they just shut their eyes to it. They'll be pretty well taken to when she does die."

"I should like to go to her at once," said Hester, with a sob.

"You can come, and you'll be all by yourselves, I promise you, this morning," she replied; "the young ladies nor my mistress don't get up on a Sunday till it is near time to go to church. Mr. Bramwell said he'd send you; and I'm glad you've come, if nobody else is."

She led the way up two dark flights of stairs, and into a small room at the back of the house. It was almost filled up by a large canopy four-post bedstead, with heavy moreen hangings ; lying upon which was the small spare form of a child, with its meagre face and bright eyes turned anxiously towards the door. The forlornness of this little creature, dying alone and unloved, her very death unnoticed, smote Hester to the heart ; and she sank down beside the bed, and hid her face from the searching and unquiet eyes of Rose Morley's desolate child.

"It's a good kind nurse as Mr. Bramwell has sent," said the servant ; "she's going to read the Bible and pray for you, my poor dear. She'll stay all the morning with you, while I'm busy ; and you must ask her for anything you want."

"I don't want anything," answered the plaintive voice of the child ; and Hester raised her head to look into the white face. There was a profound serenity and patience in it : a look almost of satisfaction. She smiled faintly at Hester, and stretched out her thin fingers to touch her forehead.

"You can go away now, please," she said to the servant ; "and then she will begin to read and talk to me."

Hester listened to the servant's retreating steps, and then she lay down beside the child, and took her fondly and gently into her arms.

"I am come instead of your mother," she said, with difficulty restraining her tears ; "you may talk to me as if I were your mother."

"Do you know my mother ?" she asked.

"Oh, very well indeed, my darling," answered Hester ; falling by instinct into the caressing tone and manner of a tender-hearted woman towards a child, though she had had nothing to do with any child before. "Why, she lives

with me down at Little Aston ; and perhaps some day you may come too, and be my little sister. It will all be as God pleases ; He knows best."

"Yes," said the child, smiling ; "of course He knows best. But sometimes I think if He'd only let me and my mother live together ! I've lived at school all my life, and I've only seen her for a day or two, now and then. Do you know why we could not live together ?"

"She was very poor," said Hester, "and she had to work very hard for herself and you."

"And my father must have been very poor, too," continued the feeble voice. "I don't think anybody else in the school was ever so poor, for they all have holidays, and I never have. The girls used to tell me such things they'd done, when they came back to school. Did you used to have holidays ?"

"I never went to school," answered Hester.

"Never went to school !" she repeated, raising her feeble head a little to look into Hester's face. "How happy you must have been ! But I've been at school all my life ; and now I think God will let me go to have my holidays with the other children who are dead. There is a verse somewhere, about the streets being full of little children playing. What do you cry for, dear ? I don't know what to call you. What is your name ?"

"Hester," she replied, pressing her lips upon the little hand. The child's blue eyes glistened, and her mouth quivered with surprise and delight.

"Why, that is my name !" she cried. "You never can be the good Hester, the dear, beautiful Hester I'm called after ! Oh, are you that Hester ? My mother used to cry ever so when she talked about her. Are you the very same Hester ?"

"Yes, my darling little Hester," she sobbed ; "I was her little girl once."

"Then we are both Hesters !" said the little girl, with a playful smile. "How droll that is ! Are we alike in anything else, I wonder ? How old are you ?"

"I am ten years older than you," she answered.

"And perhaps you will live to be very old, and I shall die soon," said the child ; "no, we are not alike in anything else. Are we alike, big Hester ?"

"Yes ; I used to be a very lonely little girl like you," said Hester pitifully ; "nobody ever used to nurse me or play with me like other children. My mother was dead."

"Had you a live father ?" asked little Hester.

"Yes," she answered.

"Then we are not alike in that," went on the child ; "I never had a father. He died before ever I was born. If he had been alive he would have worked and worked to get money that we might not be so very poor, and for me to have some holidays. Did you know my father, Hester ?"

"Dear child, yes !" she murmured, sadly.

"Oh, tell me about him. Tell me what he was like. My mother always cried if I spoke about him ever. I dream of him so often ; every night now, I think. Do you think he will know me in heaven ?"

"Your Father in heaven will know you," answered Hester.

"Yes, God," said little Hester, with a simple confidence. "I shall see Him and know Him. But shall I see my father who was my father here ?"

"My darling," she replied, "it will be all as God chooses for us."

She nestled down contentedly for some time in Hester's arms ; not sleeping, for her eyes were wide open, but with

a restfulness more full of pleasure than sleep. But after a while she stirred again, and took off her white cap, letting her hair loose about her face. It was soft brown hair, cut short, but curling naturally in small shining rings.

"You shall cut some off," she said; "I want to give them away. There are some scissors on the table."

She watched the curls drop off one by one upon the quilt, and twisted them round her languid fingers.

"Such a funny thing!" she said, looking up with shining eyes. "I was just thinking how my father would like one of them. There's one for my mother, and one for Mr. Bramwell, and one for you; only three little curls to give away! Some of the girls have uncles and aunts and grandfathers, as well as their own father and mother and brothers and sisters. How I should have liked to have them all; and how I would have loved them! Are you any relation to me Hester?"

"Not exactly, my darling," she said.

"Did you love my father when you knew him?" she asked.

"When I was as old as you I loved him very much," answered Hester, with a faltering voice; "he used to read to me sometimes while I sat on his knee."

"But he never nursed me on his knee!" cried the child, with a sudden passion of tears. "He never saw me, and we never knew one another."

She wept bitterly for some time leaning against Hester, who soothed her with fond words and caresses, until she grew calm again, and lay down upon the pillow exhausted, with her face as white as the cover upon which it rested.

"Tell me what he was like, while I lie quiet," she whispered, almost inaudibly.

"He was tall and very handsome," said Hester.

"Very handsome," repeated his little daughter, with lips that could scarcely speak.

"And he had a very pleasant voice," continued Hester.

"A very pleasant voice," echoed the child's faint tones.

"Oh, my darling!" cried Hester, "I cannot tell you any more. Be quiet now. You will hurt yourself by talking."

"The doctor told me I wasn't to talk at all," she said; "but I can't help talking to you. I like to hear your voice speaking. You shall read to me, if you please."

Hester read to her in soft low tones for some time. until she fell asleep, holding her hand fast. By-and-by there came in the lady of the house, a tall, gaunt, weary-looking woman, with all the airs and affectations of the mistress of a cheap boarding-school. She acknowledged Hester's presence by a stiff courtesy, and stood at the foot of the bed regarding the child with an air of cold anxiety.

"What do you think of her?" she asked in a low voice.

"I think she will never get well," whispered Hester, with tears in her eyes.

"Dear! dear! But that is very trying," she replied; "especially in a school. The parents might think it was measles or small-pox. She must be taken away at once."

"I will speak to Mr. Bramwell about it," said Hester. "To-night I shall go to his chapel, and then I shall see him. She shall be removed to-morrow, if possible."

"Is there no immediate danger?" she asked.

"I should think not," answered Hester; "but the doctor will tell you when he comes."

When he came, the doctor, who was merely a young medical assistant to an older man, gave it as his opinion that the child might rally and live through the summer, but would certainly "be cut off" at the approach of winter.

Hester staid beside her all day, and only in the evening left her in order to go to Carl's chapel, which was about two miles away. As she stooped over to kiss her, the little Hester put her arm feebly round her neck and looked up beseechingly into her eyes.

"You will not be away long," she murmured ; "you are sure to come back?"

"I am sure to come back very soon," she said ; "and perhaps I shall bring Mr. Bramwell back with me. **You** are fond of him?"

"Oh, very fond," whispered the **child**.

CHAPTER LV.

THEN AND NOW.

ALL the day, after Hester's departure, John Morley suffered under an access of morbid and despairing thoughts. The stillness of his home was more profound than ever, now that he had lost the soft footstep of his daughter moving about his room, and her low caressing voice speaking to him from time to time. Lawson entered the room once, after knocking loudly at the door and receiving no answer ; he found his master lying half across his desk, so absorbed in reverie as to be unconscious of his presence, until he touched him on the shoulder. Then he lifted up his face, greyer and more haggard than ever, with eyes burning more deeply in their sockets, while his head trembled as if with palsy. It was the last interruption but one which broke in upon his melancholy memories.

This other interruption was the entrance of the young maid-servant, who, with a tearful face, came to tell her master that a brother of hers was coming home to pay his last visit there, before emigrating to America. If he could only spare her till Monday evening, Lawson's mother had promised to look after the house and wait upon him. John Morley said "Go," almost impatiently. It signified nothing to him who performed the small services he required.

Madame Lawson had promised Hester to go about nine o'clock, or a little later, after her son's comfort had

been provided for ; and to stay all night and the next day in John Morley's house. The girl wanted to leave at four, and it seemed but a small thing to her to ask the poor woman her mistress gave a shelter to, to fill up the space between her own departure and the arrival of Madame Lawson. She asked Rose boldly ; and Rose seized the chance with the passionate eagerness of one who has long waited for the moment when they can do something, anything, for their beloved. She would have waited upon John Morley, upon this white-headed, poverty-stricken, deserted husband, on bended knees, with deep abasement and trembling devotion. But all her duties would be to prepare his tea, and summon him to it, keeping herself unseen. She stole up stairs with a noiseless step, into his chamber, and arranged the bed again, which had been roughly and hastily done by the servant, making it as soft and full of comfort as tender hands could make it. Then she looked out the clothes he would need for the Sunday, lingering over her work with a frightened ecstasy. When the hour for tea came, she set the tray and his chair near the fire, in a room adjoining his sitting-room, and put his slippers on the hearth. Would he need anything she had not placed upon the table, and ring for her, so giving her some chance of hearing his voice, and looking furtively into his face ? Whether she dreaded or hoped for this most she could not tell, while she stood at the kitchen door, with her hands pressed against her heart, as she listened to his movements about the other room. But he did not ring ; and, after a brief meal-time, she heard him go back to his own sitting-room. He remained there till seven o'clock, when he went out to attend some meeting at the chapel.

She was alone in her own house now, quite alone. She could venture into John Morley's desolate parlor which she had seen so often from without. How well she remember-

ed the old days passed in it! Here was the carpet she had chosen herself, faded and threadbare, with one long, narrow, bare strip, which his feet had worn in his restless paces to and fro. The scarlet baize she had nailed with brass nails along the edge of the bookshelves, in order to brighten up the dingy rows of books, was a deep dull red now, and the nails no longer glistened in the firelight. She began to wonder how the room overhead would look; her room, which she had locked up herself, and the key of which was still safe in her keeping. She knew herself to be absolutely alone, with no fear of interruption for another hour to come. Lingered for a few minutes in a tremor of nervous hesitation, she could not succeed in shaking off the feverish desire to see it once again, during this absence of Hester, which made it possible to do so. She flew back to her refuge, and sought for the key at the bottom of the box which held her scanty possessions. It had accompanied her in all her wanderings,—this key which she had turned upon the paradise she despised, and could never more re-enter. She hastened with it—for her time was not long—up the staircase again, which she had so often trodden with a light step and lighter heart; past Hester's little room, so severe, so simple, so bare of all the common luxuries of girlhood; past her husband's chamber. Beyond stood the door which no hand had opened since she herself had closed it. The key was not rusty, but the lock was, and it grated harshly, and the hinges creaked, as she pushed open the door. Then she stood inside.

Just as she had left it! She had remembered to bring a candle with her, though it was still daylight in the other rooms, and its faint light was insufficient to make manifest all the ravages of time. There were the books she had been reading, after her fitful fashion, still scattered on the table, with a man's glove lying among them; she re-

collected it in an instant, it was one of Robert Waldron's. There was her fanciful little couch of blue damask drawn up to the fireside, and the chair beside it where he had been sitting, and Hester's low hassock between her seat and his. The piano was still open, and a yellow page of music, no doubt some song she had been singing to him, was resting upon the stand. A grey dust and tarnish had fallen upon all, but she scarcely saw it. It seemed to her as if it could only have been yesterday, last night, when she locked it up; and she had been passing through some horrible dream. This sharp martyrdom of repentance was no more than a trick of her forewarning conscience. The utter stillness and solitariness of the house was but an accident of the passing hour. Hester must be asleep in her little bed; and her husband would come in soon from chapel. When she saw Robert again she would bid him come near her no more.

Rose stood in the middle of the room gazing vacantly about her. It seemed as if after a mighty tempest, after a strong flood of great troubles and sins which had tossed her feeble soul from billow to billow, she had been brought suddenly home again to the haven where she could cast anchor in still smooth water. She had been very happy to-day. She felt like a child whose face is hidden in the close embrace of its mother, and who sees no longer the terrors which have driven it to that refuge. She was vaguely, childishly happy again for a moment. Everything evil was drawing near to an end. The night was almost past, and the day was at hand. Even here, in the place which should have upbraided her most loudly, she saw sadness indeed, but not hopelessness. Her sins, which were many, had been pardoned.

She crossed the room slowly to the piano, and stooped down to look at the music-sheet on it. It was no song, but

a chant,—“I will arise and go to my Father.” She remembered now that it was to her husband, not to Robert Waldron, she had sung it; and he had stood beside her, his hand resting upon her shoulder, and his voice, a low, weak, yet sweet voice, joining with hers. Was it not a token for good, finding this sacred chant still open? Then she had known nothing about going to the Father. Now she had arisen, with all her sins and unfaithfulness, and gone to Him, and He had seen her afar off, and had received her gladly. Would it not be the same with her husband? She sat down and ran her fingers absently along the discolored keys. The jarring, jingling tones, which had lost all harmony, brought her back sharply to the full reality of her position. She could dream no more. The small mirror, which she had had set over the piano, reflected from its dulled surface a faded, stricken, withered face, instead of the bright, laughing features of the young, proud mistress of a new home. She was Rose Morley, the guilty wife of a dishonored husband.

CHAPTER LVI.

A NIGHT OF TERROR.

JOHN MORLEY went up to the chapel, and after waiting there some time, and finding no other member of the small church was coming, he went back directly to his house. All day he had been the prey of vehement agitation, and the approaching return of night did not tend to allay it. He let himself into his lonely dwelling, and stood upon the threshold for a minute, with the door half open in his hand, listening for some sound to break the stillness of his home. A craven fear of being quite alone was at work within him for the first time in his life ; his flesh crept and his nerves tingled. But he had no resource, there was no means of escaping from this new and panic dread. He closed the door and went on, stopping to change his boots for the slippers he found put ready for him. He entered his own parlor and lit his lamp ; but this attack upon his nervous system continued to gather strength. His hands trembled until he could not turn over the leaves of his book. A vague, indescribable impression was produced upon his mind by something in the aspect of his room, that his lost wife had been there a few minutes ago,—had but just quitted it. He fancied more keenly than ever that he could almost see her and hear her. An agony of mingled despair and tenderness shook his soul to the centre. It might have been but a day or two since Rose had forsaken him ; it might have been the

very night when he had aroused his little girl from her sleep, telling her it was better to die than to live. There was something unutterably mournful in this strong, unWitnessed, insupportable anguish, which mastered John Morley, and brought the past before him a hundred-fold more vivid than the present.

Upon this paroxysm of his soul, which just now was bearing him rapidly to the verge of insanity, there fell suddenly the shrill, false jangle of the piano in the room overhead. He lifted himself up, and hearkened with a ghastly face. The discord ran through his fevered brain once, and then ceased ; the house was plunged again into the dreariness of an unbroken silence.

He held his breath and listened for some minutes, his heart failing him for fear of he knew not what. He believed that Carl had summoned Hester to the death-bed of Rose. Could it be, could it possibly be, that in the supreme hour and article of death, she was having permission to return once more, in ghostly presence, to her abandoned home? His wrath against her, and his tenderness for her, rose again to their highest pitch. If her apparition itself stood before him, the mere spectral shade of his guilty wife, he would hurl against it all the pent-up anger of these many years, or lavish upon it the treasure of his unexhausted love. Was there any other sound to be heard, or was it his fancy that now a stealthy step, scarcely louder than the passing of a breath of wind through the house, was creeping across the floor overhead? The moisture stood in large drops upon his forehead ; and his face grew set and pallid as the face of a corpse. He tried to speak aloud, if only to dispel the awful stillness about him, but his throat was dry and his tongue parched. At length there came to his ears a shrill cry and a smothered sob,—a strange, terrible, inexplicable sound, which made

him deaf for a minute or two to every other noise. When that surging in his brain was over, and his dimmed sight grew clear again, he laid a stern hold upon his fleeting courage, and with slow steps ascended to the floor above.

His own chamber was the first upon the landing, and he had scarcely ever been beyond it. He passed Hester's open door, and glanced round the room, but there was no sound or sight of horror there. Farther on, a fringe of light glimmered in the dusk from under the door of the locked-up drawing-room. His footsteps faltered and were arrested for an instant. A light there! What then could there be within that room? His failing and reluctant feet carried him to the very door-sill. The catch of the lock had slipped, and the feeblest effort of his hand would suffice to push the door open; but he could not move. Superstition swooped down upon him with all the might of its most ghastly terrors, and he had no strength to contend with it. At last he lashed himself up into a fury, a storm of ruthless anger against Rose. If he and she were both dead, and had met at length in the mysterious land of spirits, he would even there denounce her for the woes she had made him suffer.

He pushed the door with his hand, and looked in. The one candle burning upon the table left the corners of the room in obscurity, but there fell enough light upon the piano to disclose to him the form of some woman, slight and slender like her, with a pale grey shawl wrapped about her, leaning forward, or rather lying against the piano before which she sat. The attitude was utterly helpless and inanimate, as if she had fallen there fainting. Her long fair hair had dropped down about her shoulders. He held himself back, quivering with passion, and gazing at her with steadfast and flaming eyes. It was indeed Rose, whether in the body or out of the body, he could not tell;

it was his wife, whom he had loved so fondly, and whom he had loved more, he knew it now, since she left him than while she was still with him.

He raised his hand to his burning head, and pressed it across his eyes, but the apparition remained there in its attitude of motionless despair. Once he thought it moved, but it was only the flicker of the candle in the draught from the open door which set the shadows about her fluttering. He heard in the distant part of the house, where the workrooms were, the shutting of some door, and the turning of a lock, and he knew it was Lawson going away from his work. He was late to-night, he thought ; turning the words over and over again in his mind, as if glad to get some common every-day idea into his brain. The candle was burning low, and would not last many minutes longer. In a short time he would be alone in the darkness, with this awful and speechless form. He must needs speak ; he must enter ; he must perhaps touch this strange shadow. With a sudden shrill cry of a man's most terrible anguish, which awoke hollow echoes through the empty house, John Morley cast himself into the gloomy room before him.

Ten minutes later he came out again, with a face from whose veins all the blood seemed to have gone, but with a stain of deep crimson upon the palms of his hands, at which he looked again and again with eyes of horror. He went hesitatingly down stairs into his own parlor, and opened his desk, and a drawer within it where he kept his money. He took out a roll of notes, and spread them before him with an air of bewilderment, resting his forehead upon his hand, which stained his white hair with clammy clots of blood. He sat there a few minutes only, but he fancied these were hours ; and the soft pure grey of the evening sky, with a few rosy clouds floating over it, he took for the

dawn of the morning. He roused himself, shuddering ; and lifting his bloodshot and heavy eyes to the dying light in the heavens, he muttered aloud in the silent room, "I must flee to Hester."

He went up stairs to put together a few clothes in a port-manteau, with a confused notion of preparing for a journey. Then he caught sight of his blood-stained hair in the glass, and shivered and moaned like a frightened child. He washed it and his hands, again and again, as if he could see the stain long after it had been washed away. After this he took up his portmanteau and left the house unlocked and empty ; strode quickly up the street, past the chapel, under the trees, and along the lanes which had invited him in vain only yesterday. He walked all night swiftly, with perplexed and wandering thoughts ; and when the dawn came, he inquired of the first person he met where the nearest station was, and there he took the earliest train for London.

CHAPTER LVII.

BESIDE HIMSELF.

A LITTLE after six o'clock on Sunday evening Hester entered the porch of Carl's chapel. Already the fashionably dressed congregation were beginning to arrive, and she heard his praises spoken as she waited to be put into a seat. She was at last conducted to an obscure place in one of the galleries, where, though she could see the pulpit well, it was not probable that Carl could recognize her face amidst the number surrounding him. Hester was content, however ; she would hear him again, and when the service was over she would go to speak to him in the vestry about little Hester.

Carl appeared at the appointed minute, and she trembled nervously as he glanced round the crowded chapel. Then followed an hour of intense happiness.—that of a woman whose most devout worship is led by the being she loves the most. Hester's whole soul was in that brief fleeting season of worship ; an interval so short, that when the mass of people rose to go away, she looked about her in amazement. Carl seemed to have caught her eye then, for he stood a moment before leaving the pulpit, gazing towards her. It was some time before she could get down the crowded staircase, and when she did so the chapel-keeper told her the best way to get to the minister's vestry was to go round on the outside of the building. She passed on with the throng, but just as she was about to turn the

corner of the chapel, she felt her hand suddenly seized and herself drawn rapidly down towards the street. It was her father, who had taken hold of her, and was hurrying her towards a cab which was waiting at a little distance. But what could bring her father there? What terrible calamity could have driven him so far adrift from his fixed habits? Had Rose persisted in discovering herself to him; and had some catastrophe been the result? He did not speak to her, and when she spoke he appeared deaf to her voice. He sank down into a corner of the cab, covering his face with his hands. Once he looked up, and there was a gleam of light, not quite sane, in his sunken eyes.

"What is the matter, father?" she ventured to ask.

"Not yet!" he cried, shrinking back again; "not yet, Hester? I am not quite ready yet."

They drove rapidly to some station, and he sent her on to the platform while he bought the tickets. A train was on the point of starting, and he hurried her into a carriage. It never occurred to her to suppose that they were going anywhere but back to Little Aston; and by the speed at which they travelled, she judged that they would soon be half-way there. This was as they passed some what slowly through a station (for they stopped at none), and she saw by the clock there that it was after eleven. She wondered how little Hester would bear the disappointment of not seeing her again; and the tears she could not keep back, and which she would not wipe away lest her father should see them, stole down her cheeks. Presently the train slackened speed, and in a few minutes came to a stand-still. There was no station near; and it was as dark as it ever is during the early nights of June.

"What can be the matter?" she exclaimed to herself, involuntarily. Their fellow-passengers were collecting together their cloaks and parcels, and preparing to leave

the carriage. The gentleman who was next to her caught her half-audible exclamation.

"There is nothing the matter," he answered, pleasantly; "the train runs alongside the vessels, and we have nothing to do but embark immediately. Your luggage will be quite safe."

"This young lady is my daughter," said John Morley, hurriedly; "and I will take care of her."

Hester looked out, and saw an utterly inexplicable and unfamiliar scene. There lay just before her the black outlines of a steamer, and beyond them a dark tossing plain, with a faint suggestion of light upon it, as if it had not yet quite lost the lustre of the sunset. A confusion of strange cries and voices surrounded her, amid which she heard her father whisper, "For God's sake be silent, and follow me." Almost before she could recover from her amazement, she found herself on the deck of one of the steamers, which soon began to move slowly away from the pier.

The other passengers had hurried down into the cabin to secure berths for the night; and the deck was deserted by all except the captain and his crew, who were busy in getting safely out of port. John Morley led his daughter to a seat removed from every danger of being overheard, and sat down close beside her, shivering with excitement as much as from the chilly air of the sea.

"Hester," he whispered, in a hollow, tremulous voice, "I am fleeing to a city of refuge."

"What is it, father?" she asked, in steady and tender tones. "Tell me all that has happened to you."

He was silent for some time, his eyes fixed upon the dark line of shore they could yet see as they were leaving it behind them. Hester asked herself if all this was true, — that they, her father and herself, were escaping secretly by night from England, where only a few hours ago she

had been listening to Carl in his own chapel. It was all too real, astounding as it was, for her to doubt its truth; it was too wild to be a trick of her sleep. The great sea spread around them,—the sea she had never seen, which she would never see again without remembering this night, indelibly stamped upon her brain. Without moving or speaking, she sat beside her father, waiting for him to break the silence.

“I scarcely know how it all happened,” he said at last, in the tone of one thinking aloud. “Rose was there,—not her ghost; it could not have been that, for the stain of blood came off upon my hands, and my hair was reddened with it. She was dead when I went into the room,—murdered; but who could have murdered her. I would not have touched a hair of her head. Such pretty hair it used to be, as golden as the sunlight. But then, you see, nobody would have believed that I was not the murderer. I do not know myself who could have been so cruel, so fierce; and she had harmed no one as she had harmed me. All the world would have said I was guilty; and if they had not hanged me, they would have imprisoned me as mad, though I should swear I did not do it. So I said I will flee,—I will escape from my country while there is time. It would be a most horrible thing for my daughter, if her father was hung as a murderer, or shut up as a madman.”

Hester's heart had grown faint and sick as she listened to her father's almost unconscious and delirious sentences. But at this moment the captain came up to ask them if they would not go below, and she had to control herself to answer him quietly.

“My father is ill,” she answered, “and we would rather stay here a little while. By-and-by we will go down.”

He staid beside them for a few minutes, making some

observations which she scarcely heard, though she exerted herself to reply to them ; and then he left them once more to themselves.

"Father," she said earnestly, "answer me a question or two. How did you find out she was at home?"

"I came in from chapel at twenty minutes to eight," he said, "and sat down in my own chair ; but I could not read. All at once I heard the sound of her piano, and, some minutes after, a strange noise between a scream and a sob. Then, just as the clock was striking eight, I went up stairs, and there was a light shining in her room, and I went to look in, and Rose was there,—Rose herself ; not her spirit."

"Did you speak to her?" asked Hester.

"No," he answered, "my tongue refused its office. I went up to her and laid my hand upon her, but she never moved. Then I saw her hair all clotted with blood, and I lifted up her head and found that she was gone far away from me where no man knows love or hatred. She was dead—murdered, and could never be pardoned by me."

"But how could it be?" cried Hester, who could scarcely realize the fact that Rose was dead, in the horror of hearing that she had been murdered."

"I know nothing," said John Morley, gloomily. "We were alone in the house. It was I who found her. My hands and hair were stained with her blood. If I had given myself up, they could have done nothing else but punish me for the crime. But I am innocent, Hester : as innocent as yourself."

"And did you leave her there?" she asked.

"I carried her to the sofa," he said, "and laid her down gently. She was dead and I could kiss her again. I covered her over with a grey shawl which was stained red. The candle was almost burnt out and I could stay no longer. Yes, I left her there ; and she lies there now.

perhaps. They may not discover I am gone very quickly, for nobody goes into that room. I think I have been almost mad all day, but I am better now with you, Hester. O Hester, be very pitiful towards me ! ”

He broke out suddenly into low, smothered moans and wailings, and put his arms round her, resting his head upon her shoulder, while she pressed her lips again and again to his face, and told him that she was his daughter, his child, who could never forsake him, never feel anything but love and pity for him. So she soothed him, crushing down the grief and terror of her own heart, and seeking the most tender expressions of her affection for him. He grew calm at last, calmer than he had been for many days.

“ Did I do right in fleeing ? ” he asked, anxiously, I could bear it no longer. My dishonor has been a burden as heavy as I could bear ; and this would have been too much. I must have lost my reason, if they had not made it seem that I had lost it before. Do you think me mad, Hester ? ”

“ No, my dear,” she answered. He clung so much to her like a child, that unconsciously her voice and expression were those of one who talks to a child. There were many things she wanted to learn yet, and she must keep him as calm as possible.

“ But I am almost mad,” he said. “ I have neither a sound mind nor a sound body. I have destroyed them both. O my God ! what is to become of us ? ”

A cry which Hester echoed in her heart of hearts. She knew that his words were true ; that he had been dwelling too long on the border-land between sanity and insanity. But then, was it indeed true that his hand had not been suddenly hurried into a deed of violence such as he had committed against Robert Waldron ? How was she to be sure of that ? Rose was dead—murdered. Who could be

guilty, if it were not her father? She felt a steadfast child-like loyalty towards him. If he were criminal, her calm, innocent, simple nature would understand the character of his crime better than a more worldly and more divided heart could have done. It was heinous, terrible, mournful, but not unpardonable: not without extenuating circumstances. She must think for him, take the guidance of his flight. To her fell the choice of a city of refuge.

"Where are we going to?" she asked, and the simplicity of her question struck her forcibly amid the perplexity of their circumstances.

"We are going to Paris," he answered; "after that, anywhere, —anywhere that I can be safe."

The morning dawned before Hester could form any plan for the future. She saw the pale streaks of light coming across the smooth level of the sea, and playing upon the edge of its soft ripple. Her father had fallen into an uneasy slumber, and his dress and hers were wet with the heavy dew of the night. She had been tempted to wish that both of them could be lost amid the multitude of waves, and lie together in peace with the depths closing them about, and the weeds wrapped about their heads. The captain came and looked compassionately upon her father's pallid face, and she called a shadowy smile to her lips and eyes as she met his gaze.

"Good-morning," he said, in a low tone; "we have had a very fine passage across."

"Yes," she answered.

"You have crossed before?" he continued.

"No," said Hester.

"Well, there is no trouble; the omnibus will be at the gate of the custom-house to take you straight on to the station. I will get your luggage passed quickly."

"We have scarcely any luggage," she answered, with an

inward tremor; "only my father's portmanteau I shall buy all I want in Paris."

"To be sure," said the captain; "you will get everything in the first fashion there."

A spasm of hysterical laughter contracted Hester's throat, and played oddly upon her face. A flash of the grotesque darted across the profound darkness of her circumstances; but it brought with it a vivid quickening of her oppressed brain. She saw what she could do. She would pass quickly through Paris with her father, not tarrying there at all, and go on to Burgundy. She knew well by the minute description of Lawson's mother, the little town from which she had come. It was a very quiet, very remote place, several leagues from the nearest line of rail, and where the visit of any English was an almost unheard-of thing. In this hour of keen mental activity she could recollect the names of the curé, the doctor, the baker even, all whose histories the garrulous old Frenchwoman had loved to narrate. The little town did not seem strange to Hester. It offered her an asylum from afar off within its old grey walls. She knew the patois of the province well; she could speak it as freely as the purer French Robert Waldron had perfected her in. This should be their city of refuge.

CHAPTER LVIII.

A CITY OF REFUGE.

H ESTER experienced no difficulty in making her way through Paris. Her habit of conversing in French with Lawson and his mother had given her a fluent use of the language ; and though her manner and appearance, as well as her father's, were unmistakably English, she had no need to attract unusual attention to them by any ignorance or difficulty on her part. She made inquiries as to the route for Burgundy, and went at once from one station to the other, staying no more than a few hours in Paris. They arrived in safety, and without observation, at the small country station to which they were bound. There were yet six leagues to accomplish before reaching Ecquemenville ; but an omnibus from that town was waiting for the train. It was a four hours' journey, for the diligence was heavy and cumbrous, and the cart-horses attached to it by rope harness were slow-footed ; four miles and a half an hour was the utmost speed they could attain. After the rapid whirl, and the overwhelming excitement of the last thirty-six hours, Hester found a relief in the slow progress of their conveyance. She was worn out, and her heavy eyes scarcely saw the strange country they were traversing ; but John Morley was all eager and surprised attention. They were crossing a level plain of several miles, with neither hedgerows nor clumps of trees to vary its uniform aspect, except that here and there, at the interval of two or three

miles, they passed a coppice of stone-pines ; and that very far away in the marvellous clear light of the distance, there stretched a black, irregular line against the horizon, which spoke plainly of a forest. Since the moment the steamer had left the pier at Folkstone, John Morley had abandoned himself implicitly to Hester's guidance. He did not ask where she was taking him ; though his mind was all alert to the impressions the novel scenery was producing upon it. He had never been out of England ; and as we know, for the last eleven years, he had travelled no farther from his house than to the chapel where he had once been wont to worship. He had passed through sharp dolour and sore travail, and come out after the sharpest and sorest pang of all into this new life, where every object was fresh and strange to him. His brain, with a healing forgetfulness, refused to recall the later scenes through which he had come. Everything about his route diverted his thoughts. The blue blouses of the peasantry, the coquettish snow-white caps of the country-women, the jingle of the bells about the horse-gear, the wonderful blue of the sky, the clear dark shadows, the golden harvest of the vast plain ripening in the full light of the June sun, withdrew him from his morbid musings. By fine gradations, as fine as the footsteps with which the morning steals towards the sleeping earth, his bent and heavy eyebrows relaxed a little, and the rigidity of his lips softened. One might have said towards the close of their journey, when they came in sight of the little town, lying in a valley, and girded about with vineyards with grey old walls and narrow gateways, giving it the aspect of a true city of refuge ; one might have said that his face kindled with a smile struggling from his soul, but scarcely strong enough to reach the surface.

The only thoughts Hester's weary mind could retain had been anxious ones. Her father had given up his

pocket-book to her ; and she had found in it notes for £100, the residue of the money lent by Mr. Waldron. She knew pretty well the cost of living in this remote part of Burgundy, and that this sum, with her thrifty economy, would keep them well for eighteen months or more. But what was to become of them ? Were they really exiled for ever from England and Little Aston ? Safe they would be, but what a safety ? The diligence entered Ecquemenville under a gateway in the thick walls, with the old gates still hanging upon their hinges, and grown over with lichens and mosses. It stopped before an inn on one side of the square which formed the market-place, with an obelisk in its centre. A group of curious loungers awaited its arrival, and a bevy of laundresses, who were washing at a fountain close by, paused in their work as it drove up. Hester and her father descended from it, and caused as great a sensation as if they had fallen in their midst from the clouds. But, with these exceptions, the place was all silent and deserted, not a creature was to be seen ; for the sultry heat of the afternoon had driven the townspeople to their coolest retreats.

"Can you tell me if the widow Limet has apartments to let now ?" asked Hester of the conductor of the diligence, who had been staring at her and her father ever since descending from his high seat, without blinking his eyelids once, and whose eyes opened still wider at this question.

"The *veuve* Limet !" he stammered ; "is it that madame knows *veuve* Limet ?"

"No," she answered with a wan smile, "but I have heard she sometimes has rooms to let ; and as we may stay here some time, I prefer going there to living at an hotel."

He would conduct them to the widow Limet's, he said ;

and they followed him, Hester recognizing the place from the minute and frequent descriptions of Lawson's mother. Here were the shops, with their odd miscellany of wares, the cafés painted in gay colors, the butchers' open stalls with their dwarf orange-trees and flowers, all of which Madame had loved to contrast with the dingy streets of Little Aston. Towards one corner of the square, five or six of the shops, having their upper floor projecting above them for eight feet or more, were as cool and almost as dark as cellars. At one of these their conductor stopped, and called aloud for the widow Limet, who appeared from some inner recess, and engaged at once in a combat of words with the guide, so garrulous and voluble, that Hester could not put in a syllable for some time.

"We have been recommended to you," she said, recollecting how often Lawson's mother had urged her to go to Burgundy. "My father and I want some rooms for several months. He cannot speak French. Will you let us look at your apartments?"

The widow Limet led the way up stairs to the room projecting over the shop,—an odd place to English eyes. The walls had been stencilled in gaudy colors and grotesque designs. The uncarpeted floor had been waxed and brushed to a dangerous polish. A bed, with red cotton hangings, stood in a recess, but the rest of the furniture was evidently intended to serve for a sitting room. A closet opened out of it containing a smaller bed, which Hester decided would do very well for herself. The accommodation was simple but inexpensive; eight francs a week, with attendance, being the rent the widow Limet asked for it.

In a short time John Morley and Hester were seated at the centre table, with an impromptu meal before them of omelettes and dried fruit, and cherries such as are

never to be tasted in England. John Morley ate heartily, but in vague amazement. The elderly voluble Frenchwoman trotting in and out with some utterly foreign dish in her hand, and an unintelligible jargon upon her tongue ; the bottles of wine she brought in, which she held up between his eyes and the light that he might see the golden bubbles imprisoned in them ; the ease with which Hester understood and answered ; all was odd and inexplicable, but he would give himself up to it. There was something terrible in the past over which a thick curtain had fallen ; and he would not lift it so long as it would hang there undisturbed.

That night Hester slept a heavy, dreamless sleep,—the sleep of utter exhaustion, when the brain slumbers as profoundly as the body. Nature exacted this repose rigorously ; and now that the immediate strain was over, now that the walls of the city encompassed them about, Hester could yield herself to it. She slept far into the next day ; and found, when she awoke, her father sitting at her side, watching her with the **care and tenderness of a mother.**

CHAPTER LIX.

SATURDAY NIGHT.

ON the Saturday evening, when John Morley was fleeing in a panic of fear from his own home and town, he had scarcely passed the chapel before Madame Lawson emerged from the narrow alley opposite to it. It was quite dusk, a season which the old foreigner preferred for her walks, in consequence, as she said, of the impoliteness of the English boys, who generally hailed her appearance with numerous rough greetings. She had left her son comfortably settled for the night, with permission to sleep in her own bed, which preserved its air of state in the English garret. She knocked in vain for some time at John Morley's house-door, but at last she tried the handle, which turned readily in her grasp. It was very quiet within, but a light was shining in the inner room, and she proceeded there boldly. It was John Morley's lamp burning as he had left it, and shedding its accustomed gleam upon the books scattered around it. Madame puckered her eyebrows, and hummed a little song, but no voice or sound answered her. She took up the lamp and went into the kitchen ; all was quiet and orderly there as the servant had left it, with the fire almost dead in the bottom of the grate. Up stairs, with the lamp still in her hands, for it was quite dark now inside the house, proceeded Madame, peering through each open door as she passed it. No one was to be seen. Where then was monsieur ; and where was the

servant? She could not have held any conversation with either of them, but she wished to see their faces and make her salutation to them. The still solitude daunted her; and she crossed herself several times, muttering a little prayer, as she had hummed a tune down stairs. There was another door open at the end of the passage, and she went on towards it. A faint scent of mould and mildew met her, like the air from a vault. Upon the bare planks she was treading there were spots of blood, but her eyes did not detect them. She entered the room, and looked around her. There, upon the sofa, lay a woman, perfectly motionless, with a shawl laid over her. Madame, frightened now, but brave with the courage of old age, approached her, and raised the covering from her face.

A marble face icy cold, with rigid lips and frozen eyelids; the hands also chilly and numb. Yet to her experienced touch,—for in her station an aged woman has felt the clay cold frigidity of death too often to be easily deceived,—there was still a degree of warmth which spoke of life lingering about the heart. She saw quickly that there was little which she could do, and that immediate help was necessary; but how could she make any one understand that she wanted Mr. Grant called in? Her shrewdness, a French subtlety which made her keen at scenting any intrigue, recoiled from the idea of bringing this incident before the public if it could be avoided. She raised Rose's head a little, put a drop or two of *eau de vie*, which she carried about her, into her mouth; and then locking the front door carefully, to provide against any other intrusion like her own, she hastened as quickly as she could to Grant's house.

Fortunately for the explanation of her errand, she saw, upon approaching the house, Robert Waldron standing at the gate, in conversation with Grant. The twilight had not

quite faded here outside of the town, and a soft, exquisite tranquillity, the indescribable sense of repose which can only exist at the end of the week, before the dawn of a day of rest and truce with labor, pervaded the whole evening scene. Within the house Annie was just kindling a light, and she could be seen, with her bright face, leaning over the new flame in the lamp. Robert had just looked in, and sighed to himself as he talked with Grant, whose lot seemed so much more enviable than his own, when Madame threw herself upon his arm, and poured forth her hurried story, which came like a crash of thunder upon him.

"Good heavens! what is the matter?" cried Grant, as Robert reeled and caught at the gate to keep himself from falling.

"He has discovered her and murdered her!" gasped Robert. "Come; there is life yet, she says. Be quick, Grant. Come with me instantly."

He had recovered himself while he was speaking, and darted off at full speed down the street, followed by Grant, who knew no more of what had taken place than the few incoherent words of Robert conveyed to him. They had to wait a few minutes at the door, and then Robert, still wildly and wanderingly, told him what Madame had said,—that a woman lay nearly dead in the house, and that neither John Morley nor Hester were to be found. She was almost murdered, he repeated, in a voice of extreme terror; and what would become of him and Hester?

As soon as the door was opened, Robert strode through the house into the court beyond, and up the staircase to the loft, where he expected to find Rose. The poor place was empty; the window had been left open, and the wind was flapping the curtain to and fro gayly, and fluttering the leaves of an open book upon the window-sill. He turned away from it with the last gleam of self-complacency faded

from his face. Grant, who had followed him closely, had already descended into the court, and was obeying the vehement gesticulations of Madame. Robert could not stay behind. An irresistible impulse carried him on to see the thing he dreaded ; though, like one running swiftly down hill, he might be about to cast himself into some gulf which would swallow him up in hopeless remorse. He overtook Grant at the door of the drawing-room, and thrust him roughly on one side. The lamp burned brightly, revealing to him the scene he had so often looked upon. He saw the room as Rose had seen it. His glove lying upon the table ; the open piano with the music upon it ; Hester's little seat beside his chair. And there lay Rose upon her sofa, with a shawl thrown over her, looking as if she slept. He trod softly nearer to her, and stood beside her, not heeding in his profound abstraction how solemn and silent Grant was. Her attitude was peaceful, full of rest and quiet ; the hair half hiding her face from his sight. But he could not stir, and when he tried to speak, his voice was hollow and inarticulate. He would have sacrificed his own life gladly at that instant to recall her to the life and happiness she had forfeited.

How long he stood there, he did not know ; but at length Grant put him aside gently, and lifted up the tangled and matted hair with his hand. There was the wound ; a stroke like that which had nearly slain him had fallen upon her as well. "This was his work," said his conscience, so long dethroned, but now asserting itself with mightier tyranny. He looked into Grant's face, and shuddered at the expression upon it.

"She is not quite dead, my poor fellow," said Grant pityingly ; "you recovered from a severer blow ; but she is a woman, and delicate. We must not hope too much."

For some time they were busy about the almost lifeless

form : Robert obeying mechanically the directions of Grant and translating his orders to the Frenchwoman. They carried Rose to Hester's bedroom, and laid her upon her bed. When all was done which Grant could do, he went down stairs with Robert into John Morley's parlor.

"You know who she is," said Robert, avoiding Grant's eye.

"I have guessed," answered Grant, briefly.

"He must have found her," continued Robert. "Hester sheltered her here without his knowledge. I only knew of it while he was ill a few weeks ago. But where can they be gone to?"

"They have made their escape," answered Grant; "yet it can only be by an hour or two at the utmost. Must we pursue them."

"Pursue them!" ejaculated Robert; "what for? Good God! what are we to do? If we bring him back, and she dies—"

He did not finish his sentence, but sank down into John Morley's chair, looking up to Grant with a face as haggard as that of the man he had wronged.

"If she dies, he may be punished as a murderer," said Grant; "but living and escaping, he is a madman, and he takes Hester with him! He is mad,—I could swear to it; and he has Hester in his power."

A miserable silence fell upon them both as they turned over in their minds the wretched alternative presented to them. The life of Rose hung upon a thread which might snap at any moment; and to bring back John Morley, whether she lived or died, would be to subject him to a criminal prosecution, in which he could not fail to be found guilty. As yet the secret was their own, and could be confined to very few,—themselves, Annie, Lawson's mother, and Lawson himself, perhaps, who was devoted to John

Morley. The most imminent danger to Rose would be over during the next twenty-four hours ; and until then, it being Sunday, John Morley's flight would remain unknown and unsuspected by his townspeople. He would have time to make good his escape. But on the other hand, if they let him go, they left Hester in his power, under the control of a madman, at the very moment when he was most frenzied by his recent act of vengeance. It seemed impossible to leave her thus. A flood of passionate tenderness swept across the tempest of remorse and anguish on which Robert Waldron was tossed. He would have been willing to give her into the charge and protection of Carl himself, if by that he could only be sure that she was safe and, at last, happy.

"Ought we not to tell your father?" asked Grant. "He is a magistrate, and we should incur great responsibility by keeping this matter secret. Suppose she should die!"

"We must run the risk," answered Robert, after a moment's consideration ; "I will shield you if any blame comes to us. No, no ; if we tell my father, his duty as a magistrate would be to send in pursuit of John Morley. Grant, we must let him get off ; but for Hester's sake, I must follow them myself."

"Where would they be likely to go?" said Grant. "Hester has never been away from Little Aston, and he has not stirred out of it for years. Let us look about and see if we can find any clue."

"And then I will go down to the station," added Robert.

They went up stairs to John Morley's bedroom. Every thing there bore the marks of confusion and haste. The drawers were left partly open, and the clothes in them were tossed about. Those which Rose had laid out for the next

day still lay neatly folded upon a chair by the bedside. The basin was half-full of crimsoned water, and there were stains of blood upon the dressing-table. No doubt had existed in their minds before as to who had been guilty, and everything there fastened the crime upon John Morley. But they could discover no trace of flight about Hester's room. There all was maidenly order ; a delicate, innocent, girlish harmony, which it had seemed almost sacrilege to disturb when they had laid Rose upon her bed.

"I will go down to the station," repeated Robert.

It was growing late by this time, and only two night-porters were about the station. They had seen no one ; had not been there during the day. He turned back again, disappointed and cast down. Grant wanted him to go up to his house to tell Annie he should be away all night, and to bring his case of instruments. He was about starting, when Madame, who had been wonderfully silent, ventured to ask a question.

"Where then is monsieur?" she inquired.

"I don't know," answered Robert ; "I wish to know ; and where Hester is, too."

"Oh, the little one is gone to London," answered Madame ; "she set out at midday. That is why I find myself here. I come to watch the house while mademoiselle is away."

Here was a new element of mystery and perplexity. Hester had gone many hours before John Morley could have wreaked his long-cherished vengeance upon Rose. Was it possible that he had acted upon a premeditated purpose, instead of having been hurried into the crime by the impulse and frenzy of the moment? And upon what pretext could he have sent Hester on to London? If she were gone there, Robert's jealousy assured him that she would go to Carl.

"Grant," he said, "I will start for London by the first train to-morrow."

He went at once after that to Grant's house, and returned with the articles he needed. All through the long night he watched, with Grant and Madame, by the side of Rose, whose fate swung slowly from life to death, and from death to life again, as hour after hour crept sluggishly by. To Grant there was stimulus in it; the keen interest he felt in the triumph or failure of his skill, and Madame, in almost unbroken ignorance, and only with a few cunning guesses as to the truth, looked on with nearly equal excitement. But to Robert it was a night of slow martyrdom; of a crucifixion of his whole nature. His old love for Rose, his new love for Hester, his easy good-nature, his selfish repugnance to witness any suffering, his memory of the past, his dread of the future,—all were compassing him about, and there was no refuge, nor any one to deliver him.

The morning came and found him a changed man. Grant looked into his face, and the tears started to his eyes. He pressed his hand hard in his own, but he could speak no word of consolation. Rose still lingered on the edge of the open grave, and might be swallowed up in it before he could reach London; but it was best that he should go. They parted in silence, and with a heart bowed down, Robert Waldron set out on his journey.

There were two trains starting nearly at the same time, run by different companies. Robert, caring nothing by which he went, started by the first, which was detained upon the road by a trifling accident to the engine. The second took up John Morley on its route at a station farther on; and thus, by the merest accident in the world Robert missed meeting with the man whom he was pursuing.

CHAPTER LX.

NO CLUE.

IT was six o'clock when the train reached the London terminus, and Robert knew that Carl would certainly be at his chapel. He was the only person known to Hester, and therefore it was to him that he must go for any chance of information. He called a cab, and bade the driver drive as quickly as he could to the chapel ; but the service had already begun when they arrived at it. In no mood to present himself in the midst of a congregation, Robert found his way to the vestry, and waited there in growing impatience for the conclusion of the service. The door was open, and he could hear every word uttered by Carl's clear voice, so modulated and varied that commonplace words took almost a tone of eloquence from it. He was preaching concerning temptation ; and Robert's bruised spirit felt more deeply wounded by it. What did this boy, with his pure, unsullied life, his soul which had never betrayed its own ideal, know of temptation, or of sin ? At length the torture was ended. Carl pronounced the last soothing benediction ; and in a minute or two afterwards entered his vestry.

On his part, when Carl's eyes fell upon Robert, he started back with a momentary disquiet and apprehension. He looked worn and ill. The terrible scene of the past night had made him utterly regardless of those small, minute cares as to his appearance, which had invariably oc-

cupied him hitherto. He had not slept at all ; and he had suffered horribly. The years, which had seemed to pass over him leaving no trace, had been gravings secret lines upon his features, which now started out in strong relief, ageing him abruptly. Carl fancied, as he stood by the window, with the light falling upon his head, that he could see a faint tinge of white, a shining line of silver here and there among his disordered hair. They had not parted as friends ; and they knew each other to be rivals. Carl closed the door, and locked it against any intruder ; and then waited for Robert to speak.

“Do you know anything of Hester?” asked Robert, approaching him, and speaking in a low voice.

“Hester ! no !” answered Carl, in amazement and alarm. “What is the matter with her ?”

“She came up to London yesterday,” said Robert ; “and I made sure you would know where she is. She had no one to go to but you. For God’s sake, Carl ! do not hide from me anything about her. I only ask to know that she is safe ; that you are taking care of her. I will not ask to see her. I give her up to you altogether. Only remove my anxiety. Tell me that you have found some safe home for her.”

“I know nothing about her,” cried Carl, in anxiety equal to his own. “What do you mean ? Is not Hester at home with her father ?”

“They are neither of them at home,” he answered. “Hester came to London by the twelve o’clock train from Little Aston, yesterday ; and her father fled last night.”

“Fled !” echoed Carl, his heart sinking within him.

“He has murdered Rose,” continued Robert, hurriedly ; “and I am in pursuit of him. Not to give him up ; no, but to save Hester. He is mad, Carl ; and what can she do with a madman ? What can we do ? Have you no

clue at all to the motive that brought her up here? My only hope was in you."

"Stop!" he exclaimed, as a sudden light flashed across him; "she must have come to see little Hester. I wrote on Thursday to tell her about the child; and she must have made up her mind to come and see her. She is very ill."

If it had been possible for Robert's face to grow more pallid, it would have done so at these words,—a stray shaft shot at random by Carl, whose thoughts were too full of Hester to remember that he had betrayed a secret which he was pledged to keep. He was in haste to be gone, to hurry to the school where the child lived, in order to make inquiries there. Neither of them knew by how small and trifling a chance Hester had missed breaking in upon their interview.

"Where are you going?" asked Robert, as Carl opened the outer door of the vestry.

"Where?" exclaimed Carl, impetuously: "to find Hester. We must find her to-night. Did you not say her father is a madman, and has murdered Rose? Find her? Can I take any rest or sleep until she is safe? Yet God has her in His safe keeping!"

He said these last words with a half sob, and raised his hand to his eyes for an instant. Then he turned towards Robert with a glance of profound and unutterable trouble.

"You may come with me, if you choose," he continued; "I am going to see Rose Morley's child."

Robert followed him mechanically, his head reeling and his limbs tottering. Carl saw it, and drew his arm through his own, pressing it to his side with an earnest pressure. Whatever his own anxiety and terror might be, it could not equal in anguish and intensity that of Robert Waldron.

They reached the poor, dingy house, in which his child lived; and the over-worked servant opened the door to them. They had been expecting Mr. Bramwell and the young lady for some time, she said. No, the young lady had not come back yet. She had been there all day, nursing little Miss Hester, but she had left her in the evening to go to Mr. Bramwell's chapel, promising to return as soon as she could. She had gone to the chapel, she was sure, for she had sent her own little sister to take her to the very door, where the young lady had gone in before she came away.

Carl and Robert looked at one another in mingled relief and wonder. They had traced Hester's movements up to the last half-hour; for if she had gone into the chapel, no doubt she had remained there till the end of the service. To be separated from her by no more than half an hour seemed a small thing. She would be coming in soon; perhaps she had missed her way a little. They lingered on the doorstep, looking up the street, until the girl asked if they wished to see the child, who would be glad enough of a visit from Mr. Bramwell.

"Let me see her, Carl," said Robert, entreatingly; "she need know nothing about me. If you have any pity for me in this hour, let me see her."

Carl hesitated for a moment; yet how could he refuse? What right had he to keep him away from her, when her mother was dead. For he had understood from Robert's hurried explanation that Rose was already dead. He answered by a silent gesture to accompany him; and both of them followed the servant to the room where the child lay.

The little girl had been raised upon her pillows, and sat with an eager face turned towards the door, listening to their approaching footsteps. Carl was the first to enter,

and Robert staid behind, in the background, looking on with a new sorrow in his heart. The face, a small, refined, patrician face, which had lost the look of childhood, was that of his mother in a miniature portrait she had given to him when she was dying. He knew it well, for in his boyhood he had studied the miniature by heart. But the child was speaking, and he could not bear to lose a word she said. She belonged to him. If Rose were dead, there was no other being in the world who bore any relationship to this forlorn little creature.

"Hester has been here all day," she said ; "the good, dear Hester that I'm named after. We love one another ever so ! She said she'd come back with you, and stay all night with me. Why did you not bring her, Mr. Bramwell ?"

"She will be here very soon," answered Carl.

"She says my mother is living with her in her house," continued Hester, in her plaintive and sweet voice ; "and she knew my father, when she was a little girl like me. She loved him then, and he used to nurse her on his knees. But he never nursed me. He was dead before I was born."

"Don't think about it, my little Hester," said Carl, soothingly.

"But I'm always thinking of it," she answered, "because if he hadn't died, we should all have lived together somewhere ; and I should have had my holidays, like other children. They say there are worse-off little girls in the streets ; but they have all got homes, and mothers and fathers ; and I have nobody, no home, and no father, and no one but my mother, who is so very poor she can scarcely ever come to see me. I shan't be sorry to die, if God pleases."

"Suppose your father had not died !" said Carl,

"Oh, how I would have loved him!" she cried, clasping her small hands together. "Perhaps he would have played with me sometimes! It would not have mattered then how poor we were, if we had only lived together. The other Hester said he used to be very fond of little children, and he would have been sure to have loved me the most. Hester cannot tell whether he will know I am his little girl in heaven."

Robert stood by and listened. Every word was full of heart-breaking sorrow to him; yet the calmness and tenderness of this little child soothed him. He leaned his arm against the door-post, and rested his head upon it, weeping bitterly. His child heard him, and turned eagerly again towards the door.

"There is somebody there," she said; "and they are crying. Who is it, Mr. Bramwell? Don't leave them alone in the dark. Let them come in here."

It was no more than a step or two to her side, and Robert's failing feet trod them. He sank down beside her, as Hester had done in the morning, and hid his face in her pillow, while she laid her hand upon his head timidly, yet fondly.

"Don't cry," she said; "I'm not going to die just yet; and if I do die I shall go to heaven and have my holidays. I don't know who you are; but I don't like to see you crying for me."

"Kiss me, little Hetty," he sobbed; and she laid her lips shyly upon his cheek, while he threw his arm round her with a passionate clasp.

"Tell me," he said; "where you have been living all this time, my little girl?"

"I have been all my life long at school," she answered, pensively; "ever since I can remember. I belong to nobody"

"Nobody!" echoed Robert, in a voice as troubled as her own.

"Nobody, except my mother," she continued, "and she is very poor, and always full of trouble. The other : Hester says she is going to take me away somewhere, and 4 make me very, very happy. But it is too late now."

"Too late!" repeated Robert, dropping his head again upon the pillow. She lay still and exhausted, her arm resting upon his neck; and Carl did not break the silence. What could he say that would be better than this silence? It was Robert who first looked up, and spoke.

"But she does not come, Carl," he said, in a tone of undiminished anxiety. Carl was waiting, straining his ears to catch the sound of her voice in the house below. The time was fast getting on, and the night was drawing near. Could she have lost herself in the streets of London? Where too was John Morley, who had been missing since this time the night before? They were compelled to leave the child, inconsolable because Hester was not come back, and start afresh upon their vague search. They did not know where she had passed the last night; or whether she knew any one in London. There was no clue, no track. She had been near to them both only an hour or two ago, but they had not seen her. She might be close beside them still.

CHAPTER LXI.

ANOTHER HESTER.

AT an early hour the next morning Carl and Robert went again to the boarding-school to inquire if anything had been heard of Hester. Upon receiving an answer in the negative, they did not know what further steps to take. They sent a telegram to Grant, cautiously worded : "We have had no success. Is there any change or any news?" The answer returned in the name of Annie Grant, by which they became aware that she shared the secret, was, "No change here, and no news." It reached them soon after midday on Monday. After this they visited the two railway stations at which John Morley could have arrived, and made some cautious inquiries ; but they could gain no explicit information. At present they could not resolve to set a detective to seek him out. While Rose continued in so precarious a state, they dare not let any clue to the criminal slip out of their own hands. They could not believe it possible that they had left London ; for both John Morley and Hester would be as inexperienced as children, with regard to any journey, or any scheme of flight. Carl hoped every hour that they would be found at his lodgings ; and they returned again and again to them to see if they had not arrived there.

On the Tuesday morning, Robert, who could no longer endure the suspense about Rose, determined to return to Little Aston, leaving Carl to continue his wary but close

inquiries in London. He reached the little town in the afternoon, and though he dare not let himself be seen knocking at John Morley's door, which would have attracted the attention of the neighbors, he could not resist going past the house. It looked just as usual. The closed shutters of Rose's drawing-room were still closed ; but what surprised and startled him the most was to see the shop open, as if John Morley were quietly pursuing his ordinary business. He crossed over quickly, and peered in through the windows, catching a glimpse of a withered face, which glared back upon him with tigerish eyes. The mystery was explained as soon as he reached Grant's house. Grant had resolved to keep the townspeople in the dark as long as possible, and upon Monday morning he had installed Lawson behind the counter, bidding him do his best there to meet the requirements of the few customers. It was generally reported through the town that John Morley was suffering from a second attack of brain fever ; which satisfactorily accounted for his non-appearance, and for Grant's constant attendance at his house. Rose was still in danger ; but there was a brighter hope now than there had been twelve hours before. It was growing more and more possible that she might rally from the shock, and partially recover ; but the recovery could be only partial.

Robert went on home,—to the home he had sauntered away from carelessly for an after-dinner stroll in the cool of the evening, on Saturday night. The prodigal whom Mr. Waldron had prepared for two years before, and who had disappointed him by his light-hearted gayety, was going back to his father's house now, feeling that he was no more worthy. The famine had made itself felt at last, and he knew that he had nothing but husks to eat. All the wealth and the honor, the graces and luxuries of his life

hung ragged and threadbare about him. He yearned to see his father looking out for him, ready to have compassion upon him, and run, and fall on his neck and kiss him. His heart was very full of repentance, and of a longing after some love which should not look for any worthiness in him. But his father was nowhere to be seen, and he avoided meeting his sister. He bade the servant tell Mr. Waldron, when he came in, that he was in the library ; and then he went there, threw himself upon a sofa, and fell into a troubled sleep, full of dreams. When he opened his eyes again, his father was standing by him, with a face of painful anxiety. If Carl had been struck by the change in his aspect, his father was ten times more so. This was no longer his handsome, debonair son ; but a weary and worn man, who had been beaten somewhere in the battle of life. Robert had groaned, and his face had been sadly pained in his sleep, and he had been about to awaken him from his disturbed slumbers, just as he opened his eyes and looked up. ‘ Father ! ’ he said ; ‘ father ? ’

“ My boy, Robert,” said Mr. Waldron, his hard features quivering, and his voice faltering, “ what is it, my boy ? Tell me everything. I am your father, an old man now, but I loved your mother with all my heart, and I carried you in my arms when you were a baby. You may tell me. I am not hard towards you. I can bear anything from you. There is nobody loves you as your old father does. Speak to me, Robert, as a man talks with his friend.”

Robert had had no very fixed purpose of concealment from Mr. Waldron, though he had told Grant that they must not let him know of John Morley’s crime ; and now he could constrain himself no longer. He told him all, and his father listened, with a profound affection and compassion for him, which bound their hearts more closely the one to the other.

"You know everything now," he said, at the end; "what is to be done?"

"I am not so fearful for Hester as you are," said Mr. Waldron; "be sure that her father will do her no harm if he be mad, and I suppose he must be mad. Yet he was not mad when he attacked you, Robert; he was as sane as he had been for many years. If Hester was safe with him after that, she will be safe with him now."

"But where can they be hiding?" exclaimed Robert.

"We must find out," he answered. "Hester will go back to the school sooner or later to inquire after that little child. I know her well enough for that. Be comforted, my boy. All these things will work together for good to her, if not to you. You would be content with that?"

"Content! Yes," he said; "if Hester were safe and happy I could make myself content. Father, that little child will die!"

"No, no," exclaimed Mr. Waldron, "no, no. We will give her a fresh life, Robert. She must come here,—not here with your sister, I did not mean that,—but to Little Aston. Annie Grant would have her; yes, Annie would be like a mother to her, and I would give Grant a thousand pounds to make her strong again. She has your mother's face, you say? Oh, Robert! would to God I could own her as my grandchild!"

Mr. Waldron turned away and walked to the window, looking out on the terrace, and the trim lawn, with its gorgeous flower-beds, where no child had ever played with the flowers. This little waif belonged to him, but he could have no pride in claiming her; yet he would make her life smooth and happy, God willing; she should know no shame or sorrow he could shield her from.

"We cannot own her," he said, at last; "for the child's

own sake, she must never know, and no one else must know, her relationship to us. She must come as Annie's relative; and she will be near to us, and we can care for her; but we shall always keep a distance between us, that the world may suspect nothing. I must consult with Grant and Annie about it all."

"The only Hester who will belong to me," said Robert, with a pang of passing bitterness. Yet he was comforted and strengthened by his confidence to his father. They walked together in the evening to Grant's house, and found him at home, worn out but triumphant. There was scarcely a doubt in his mind now that Rose would not die from the blow she had received; indirectly it might hasten her death, as her health was delicate, and her life had not been a good one before, but she would certainly recover for a time. If they could only acquaint John Morley with this fact he might venture home again, and the affair could be hushed up with Mr. Waldron's connivance. But the mystery of John Morley's flight remained as dark as ever; and there was settling down upon it that vague feeling of a thing accomplished and done with, which is stamped upon all the events of the past.

Grant and Annie listened gladly to Mr. Waldron's proposal to receive little Hester into their house. The only difficulty would be with regard to Rose; but they decided that she must be kept in ignorance of the near neighborhood of her child, until she was strong enough to bear it, and to be willing to see her only in secret, lest the suspicions of the townspeople should be awakened. It was necessary to remove the child from school, and as soon as she could travel with safety Grant and Annie went up to London to fetch her. But at the first glance Grant's keen eyes discovered the truth. They might bring her down to Little Aston, and warm her in the sunshine of

gladness and childish joys; but the chill of death was upon her, and the warmth had come too late to save her. They carried her back with them with the utmost care; and Robert Waldron went in to see her the day after she had been received into her new home.

"I know you again," said little Hester, receiving his kiss with quaint shyness, "you came the night the other Hester left me. She never, never came back to me. I am come here to have my holidays, and grow strong again. Do you think that I shall ever be strong enough to go back to school?"

"Not to that school," answered Robert, taking her upon his knee, and pressing her face to his.

"I never want to learn any more lessons," she whispered, "never again."

"You shall never learn any more," he promised, "but you shall have a pony to ride."

"I should be afraid of a pony," she said, stirring with joyous agitation in his arms.

"Not if I walked by you, and held you very safe," he answered; "my little girl would not be afraid then."

"I'm not your little girl," she said, plaintively, "I'm nobody's little girl."

"But I love you, and you will soon love me," he answered.

"Yes," she said.

"You must love me more than any body else, my little Hetty," said Robert, with a jealous desire to lay claim to the child's chief affection.

"Oh, I couldn't do that," she answered, frankly, "I could never do that. I love the other Hester more, and Carl. I call him Carl now because he told me. He said Hester was the dearest name in all the world to him; and now he had lost the other Hester I was to belong to him. I am

to write to him very often, when I am well enough ; and I shall begin my letters 'My dear Carl.' What ought I to call you ?"

He could not answer her, and he laid her down again upon the sofa, from which he had lifted her, arranging the cushions about her carefully, and with the most gentle hands. He came every day to see her ; and so did Mr. Waldron, whose heart opened to her with the doting fondness of a grandfather. Very smooth and very soft was the path her little feet were treading, but it tended downward to the grave ; though for some weeks no one knew it except Grant, who would not mar the slight consolation that came to Robert in this close attendance upon his little daughter.

One day, when the summer was finest, Robert took her with him to Aston Court, and the child's languid feet walked up and down the grassy length of the terrace with him. Mr. Waldron came up and took her away from him to show her the aviary ; and he heard his name called by his sister's authoritative voice.

"Who is that child, Robert ?" she inquired.

"You don't know ?" he said, in an accent of incredulity.

"No ; how should I ?" she asked. "But her face reminds me of some one. Who did you say she was ?"

"Rose Morley's child," he answered, in a hoarse whisper.

"Rose Morley's child !" she exclaimed, "but I never knew she had any child. I am sure nobody ever mentioned it to me. Wherever has she been all this time ?"

"Sister," said Robert, "the child is mine."

Miss Waldron gazed into his face, with an expression of bewilderment ; then a faint and tardy blush tinged her cheek, and her eyelids fell. She began instantly to wonder what would be the most befitting course for her to adopt.

"Robert," she said sternly, "your sin has indeed found you out ! I hope you feel how vile a sinner you are ! But I will act the part of a sister, a Christian sister, and take charge of that child of sin and shame, and see to her welfare for time and eternity. On condition, however, that you give her up to me entirely, and never see her again."

Miss Waldron ceased, with an air of self-commendation. She expected her brother to acknowledge her generosity thankfully ; but he did not answer her immediately, and when he did, it was in broken and faltering sentences.

"I should like her to be happy," he said ; "I wish her to be good. I want her to learn about God after a different fashion from my own learning. She must be with some one as merciful and tender as Christ was upon earth."

"And I ?" gasped Miss Waldron.

"You are not that," he said ; "you are nothing like that. God knows how utterly selfish my life has been ; but not more than yours, not more selfish than yours in its good deeds. I don't believe you love anybody besides yourself. You know it. Whom have you loved ? No ; I could not give the care of the child to you."

Miss Waldron stared at him with stony eyes. It had never happened to her to have her piety questioned ; she had never questioned it herself. And here was her unregenerate brother hinting with bare effrontery that she was not the favorite daughter of heaven.

"If any one is near to the very heart of Christ," continued Robert, "it is Hester. She is not forever brooding over her own soul ; but she cares for others, she loves others. It is when I think she might have loved me, that I feel my sin has indeed found me out."

Miss Waldron would listen to him and his profane words no longer. She retired with unbending dignity to her room, where she locked herself in before giving way to

her emotions. The only relief she could think of was to pour them out into the sympathizing heart of David Scott, whose deafness was such as to make writing the easiest mode of communicating the infinite varieties and minute shades of her inner life. The tears flowed down upon her paper, and impeded her progress ; but she did not lay aside her pen, until she had written sixteen pages, worthy of being published in her memoirs, when her life should be written for the benefit of unborn generations.

CHAPTER LXII.

THREE MONTHS' SUSPENSE.

BY-AND-BY some inkling of the truth began to ooze out in Little Aston. Nobody suspected the existence of Rose, who was half-living, half-dying in the house, tended by the old Frenchwoman with singular fidelity ; but it became generally believed that instead of John Morley being ill with fever, neither he nor Hester were dwelling in their own house. The sagacity of Little Aston was at no loss to account for their absence. It had been long known that John Morley was deeply involved in debt, and without doubt he was in hiding somewhere from his creditors. As soon as this report gained universal credence, Mr. Waldron came forward as the principal creditor, holding a mortgage upon the house, and undertook to satisfy all other claims, on condition that everything was left to him. He closed up the shop, put the place into the joint guardianship of Lawson's mother, and the poor woman to whom, it was well known, Hester had given a shelter in the out-buildings, and there, as far as the townspeople were concerned, the matter rested.

There were some points in the life inside the house which struck Grant as peculiar. He could hold very little conversation with Madame ; and he could not altogether account for her extraordinary and faithful attendance upon Rose all through the crisis of her illness, and during the longer and more tedious weeks of her convalescence. Mad-

ame could never be persuaded to leave her charge, and when she consented to take her necessary sleep, she would only lie down upon a bed she extemporized upon the floor, in one corner of the room. She insisted, with urgency, upon having chains placed upon the doors, even those inside the dwelling ; yet when Grant proposed that Lawson should take up his quarters there, she shrugged her shoulders, and shook her head in vehement dissent. But as soon as Rose was able to speak, and to speak fluently to her in her own language, it was easier to understand Madame's attachment to her ; and in the course of a short time Grant's perplexity passed out of his mind.

It was some weeks before Rose seemed to awake to anything like consciousness of her own state and circumstances, and afterwards she passed most of her time in a lethargic stupor. Possibly the blow she had suffered had in some manner injured her brain ; but now and then her mind appeared to rouse itself from its torpor, with the keener vigilance and activity for its long slumber. She could give no information with regard to the evening when she was hurt, beyond saying that she had heard no sound and seen no one approach her before being struck by the stealthy blow ; and that she instantly lost all consciousness. But she appeared willing to lie still in her listless debility, without asking any questions concerning her husband, in whose house she knew herself to be ; and whenever she inquired after Hester, she was easily pacified with an evasive answer.

This mental languor, with its rare intervals of activity, lasted until she was well enough to leave her bed and sit up in Hester's little study. There was no need for her now to return to the old nursery. She saw no one but Grant and Lawson's mother. Mr. Waldron bade Grant feel no hesitation in supplying her with any luxury which could soften her hard lot ; but Rose was indifferent to those

luxuries, which had once seemed to her feeble and self-indulgent nature the chief good. In the gradual and partial recovery of her mind, she began to grow restless and unquiet, an excitement which Grant dreaded for her. It was Carl she wanted, she said, day after day, whenever she roused herself to take any notice of him ; and after some delay, Grant sent for Carl.

For Carl, Hester's disappearance was the chief and most absorbing circumstance of all that had occurred in this concealed drama of life at Little Aston. He put numberless advertisements in the daily papers, so worded that if they met her eye she could not fail to understand them, and be touched by their anxiety and distress. He reproached himself with bitterness that he had not confessed his love to her, and if she loved him, that he had not bound her to himself by a delicate and light yoke of duty which her conscience would have acknowledged. If she had been betrothed to him, his promised wife, she would, above all, have owned the allegiance and fealty of affection due to him. But he had left her free, or rather, knowing Hester as he did, he had made it impossible for her to fly to him, while he was yet dumb and gave no voice to his love for her. He could not believe that she and her father had left London ; and every woman's figure at all resembling Hester's stirred every fibre of his heart. He would see it afar off, hurry to get level with it, cast his eyes upon the face, with a wild and forlorn hope, and then turn away, or pass on with an indescribable heart-sinking. As day after day wore away, and week after week, bringing no news of Hester, he grew terrified, exasperated at the long suspense. A mournful, almost reckless despondency took possession of him. His co-pastor, a man who had found his way into the tranquillity and serenity of old age, and his church, very busy with its own cares, said he was over-

tasking and irritating his brain ; and when Grant's summons came for him to go down to Little Aston, his deacons advised him to take a holiday of two or three weeks.

It was three months now since John Morley had taken his flight from Little Aston, and no trace had been discovered of him. Carl entered the town with a feeling of despair, and like Robert Waldron, went first to walk past the house before going up to Grant's home. It was dismal, silent ; like a grave, only more empty than a grave. A mystery hung about it, and made it blacker than it was before. He saw Lawson, smaller, more shrivelled, more palsied, prowling about the pavement, and looking up to the closed windows as if seeking some mode of entrance. He called to him, in the subdued voice of one who fears to disturb a quiet place, and Lawson came close up to him, gazing with his keen but sunken eyes into his face. "Do you know everything?" he asked.

"Everything," answered Carl. "Where can Hester be, Lawson?"

"You love her?" he said, sharply.

"As I love my own soul!" exclaimed Carl, passionately. "I would save her from sorrow as I would save myself from sin."

"I know nothing about them," said Lawson, in a tone of surly and dogged temper ; "but it's my notion that Robert Waldron knows. He's the devil."

He turned quickly round, and went as swiftly as his tottering limbs would carry him up the street ; while Carl walked sadly away towards his sister's house.

His arrival had been anticipated all the day, for his sister and the child Hester had thought and talked of nothing else. Annie had put the finishing touches to his room with her own hands ; and Hester had been carried there by Grant to place upon the dressing-table a pin-cush-

ion upon which she had marked with pins the word "Carl." She had to be carried up and down stairs now ; and the pony, which had occasionally borne her quietly along the lanes and across Aston Court Park, had not been mounted for some days past, though it was brought to the door every morning, that she might look at it with her pensive and gentle smile. Yet the chill shadow of her formal and unnatural life was passing away, and her smile was gayer, and her weak laughter more ready. She was sitting restfully upon Robert Waldron's knee, with her head lying upon his shoulder, when Carl entered, and with a shrill yet feeble cry of delight, she stretched out both her arms to him.

"You love Carl best still," said Robert, mournfully, when she was transferred to his arms, and was looking up into his face with eyes of vivid and childish joy.

"He knew me first," said the child, "long and long before you knew me. I couldn't help loving him best. Have you found the other Hester yet, Carl?"

"Not yet," he answered, kissing the child's quivering mouth.

"I should like you to find her before I die," she said with a long-drawn sigh of anxiety. "You won't be so sorry for me if you have her."

"There is no clue to them yet," said Robert, in a hopeless tone.

"I have a fancy," answered Carl, "that if I could see Hester's home again, some intimation might come to me, —some inspiration, I may as well call it,—to lead me to where she may be found. It is nothing but a superstition, but it is there in my mind."

"I will go with you to-morrow," said Robert.

Carl looked up steadily at him with an expression of surprise and inquiry. He did not know whether he had

ever seen Rose since the time when he and Grant had been summoned by Madame to her aid. Before the child, who was listening with eager curiosity, he could ask no question. Little Hester turned her earnest face also to wards Robert.

"Is the other Hester's home near here?" she asked of him.

"Yes," he said.

"Then you know her?" she continued.

Robert nodded, for his only reply.

"And you never spoke of her to me," she went on, reproachfully, "not when I told you all about her. You never said you knew her. I told you that she said my poor mother was gone to live with her, and you never told me it was somewhere near here. It was not kind to me. I might have seen my mother. O Carl, take me with you to-morrow to see my mother."

She was too weak to cry aloud, but the silent tears ran down her cheeks, and she sobbed quietly to herself as she hid her face against Carl's breast. Robert could endure his own pain no longer. The child's preference for Carl, —his own child,—stung him to the quick; yet he controlled all token of his natural jealousy. He kissed the small thin palm which hung listlessly down by Hester's side, and pressed Carl's hand warmly. Then with a great grief and hunger in his heart he went out into the night, and walked home slowly through deep darkness.

CHAPTER LXIII.

AN INSPIRATION.

CARL and Robert went down to John Morley's house with Grant, when he called to see Rose the next morning. While he prepared her gently for the excitement of seeing Carl, the latter accompanied Robert through every other part of the house. Madame was with them, and availed herself of the opportunity to give her tongue play. Her son, she told them, had had an access of his malady since last night, and had taken an unusually strong dose of opium, the effects of which had not worked off. His attic was unoccupied, and there was now no trace of work in it. Hester's seat was still in its place in the broad dormer window ; but it was covered with dust, as was also the binding-press. A press-pin lay in one corner, as if it had been flung there hastily ; it was rusty, but when Carl stooped to pick it up, a singular revulsion, possible to a sensitive temperament like his, caused him to shrink from touching it. His face was white when he turned away, and he hastened to quit the work-room. Down stairs the old Frenchwoman had cleaned and put everything into a cold desolate order, altogether unlike the warm living displacement and disarrangement of a house which has inmates. Carl looked about him with a chill sense of disquiet and disappointment. He felt that he should gain no hint of Hester from these rooms, empty, swept, and garnished. **It had** been a superstition,—one of those superstitions

which are apt to follow closely in the track of a passionate love ; and though he half-laughed at himself, he gave it up with reluctance.

By the time they had gone through all the deserted rooms, Rose was ready to receive Carl. He found her calm almost to apathy, until, as if she suddenly recollected why she had wished to see him, she began to speak about her child. Then Carl, who had been warned by Grant to avert from her as far as possible any extreme agitation, judged it to be best to tell her the whole truth at once.

"She is here, in Little Aston," he said, in a tone of singular sweetness, which soothed her feverish disquietude ; "my sister Annie has charge of her, and I am come from her this morning to you. If you will only control yourself, there is no reason why she should not come here to see you."

"At Little Aston !" murmured Rose ; "here, close to me ! Oh, how good you are ! My little Hetty ! I hunger and thirst to see her. Sometimes I am not quite sure which little Hetty it is. Are you sure, quite sure, that I have been a very sinful woman, and that I am not a silly giddy girl like I used to be ? Which am I, Carl ?"

He was silent, looking at her with grave, pitiful eyes ; and Rose turned her face away from him. "I know," she said with a sigh ; "yet I think the sinful woman is nearer to God than the giddy girl was. Will you let Hetty come to me to-day ?"

"She shall certainly come," answered Carl, gently ; "but I must tell you something about her. The world would be very cold and cruel for your little girl."

"Oh ! I know," she cried. "My darling ! my poor darling ! And it is I who have done it ! And I can do nothing to take away that shame. Oh what shall I do ? Carl, is there any help for a wrong like this ?"

"Yes," he said ; " God can repair this wrong. He is about to do it. But there is only one way by which a wrong like this can be set right. The world would be too cold and cruel for her, and he is about to take her out of the world."

" She is going to die ! " said Rose quietly ; closing her weary eyes, and leaning back against the pillows which supported her. She lay quite still and silent for some minutes, and a few tears stole slowly down her cheeks. Then she spoke again eagerly.

" She must come here at once, my poor little darling ! " she said. " Nobody could tend her and love her as I will. She is my own, Carl. See, I will have the little bed Hester used to sleep in put up in the drawing-room. It is a large room, and the sun shines upon it most of the day. It used to be such a pleasant room ! I am quite strong enough to nurse my own child, though I am going to die too, not very long hence. Oh, how good God is ! How He puts things right ! And you are good to me, too, dear Carl. What should I have done without you ? What would have become of me and my poor little Hetty ? Oh Carl, Carl, how very good you are to me ! "

She broke into vehement sobs, though she tried to smile ; while she caressed his hand with her own, and would have raised it to her lips.

" Hush ! " said Carl ; " hush ! You must not excite yourself. Hester shall come."

" The poor child ! " said Rose, softly to herself. " Oh, nobody knows what her life has been. I am glad she is going home to God. Why, I only saw her twice till she was six years old ; and since then I could count the days she has been with me. That is not like other children, who are always with their mother ; and nobody can love a child as its own mother does. My love ! my darling ! I

wonder if she is much altered. She was always very small and delicate, and she never had any childish ways about her ; but how could she, living always in a school with strangers ? Shall I be strong enough to nurse her on my lap, Carl ? Will Mr. Grant only let me have her sometimes just for a minute on my own lap ? If you will let me lean on your arm, I could show you at once how nice the drawing-room would be for her."

She spoke so urgently that Carl did not know how to refuse her. He raised her from her chair, and put his arm round her to support her ; her new deep joy lending her strength. The drawing-room, like the rest of the house, had been put to rights ; and, except the faded color of the furniture, there remained no traces of the dust accumulated during the many years it had been closed. The shutters towards the street were not opened, but the window looking upon a little garden admitted the autumn sunshine freely. Rose directed her feeble steps towards it.

"Here," she said, "the bed shall stand, where it is bright and pleasant ; and the room is large ; she can walk about in it well, when she is too ill to go out of doors. Oh Carl, you don't know how proud and happy I was when I was getting this room ready !"

She spoke in an accent of such poignant anguish, that Carl could scarcely keep back his tears. But this memory of the past was gone from her in an instant ; and remembering that there would be much to do to prepare the place for her child to die in, she hurried him away, telling him that he must bring her little Hester there before the night closed.

Robert was waiting for him in John Morley's parlor, still in conversation with Madame Lawson, who seemed unable to part with milord Waldron. She arrested them

even at the door, to give utterance to a last speech, which Carl could not understand.

"Be of good heart, milord," she said, "the little one will come back. Ah, how I miss her! She could speak French like a Frenchwoman. She was so sweet, so gentle, so sage! Like a little angel of the good God. There is nobody to talk to me now of Burgundy, and my little town Ecquemonville. She would talk to me for hours of monsieur the curé, and monsieur the doctor, and my friend, the widow Limet. She knew the place like what you call a map; for I built it for her one day with books,—a big book for the church, and the town-hall, and the house of the mayor, and little books for the smaller houses. Here was the place, and there the market, and yonder the fountain. Oh, the little one knew it very well! She knew all our patois, milord, as if she had been born there. I used to call her my little daughter of Burgundy, and I said to her each day, 'Go, go, my cherished one, my angel; the sun shines there as it shines never in this bad country.' But I have no one to talk to me of Burgundy now."

Robert started, and turned to look at Carl, who was waiting impatiently to get away, and whose careworn face remained blank. The inspiration had come, but not to Carl. It was to Robert that the old Frenchwoman's words gave a clue which appeared likely to lead him to the discovery of the fugitives. If Hester and John Morley had left England, a conclusion which had become almost a conviction with him, what place would they be more likely to choose for concealment than this distant, unknown, yet to Hester, familiar town in Burgundy? If they had been in London, or even in Paris, argued Robert, they could not have failed to see the English papers; and if Carl's numerous advertisements had escaped them, they must have known from the absence of all news concerning

any murder at Little Aston, that in some way or other John Morley's crime had missed the ordinary results. He could come to no other conclusion than that they had fled to some region beyond the circulation of any news from England; and the small insignificant town of Ecquemenville would be precisely such a place. It was there Hester would be found. This little town, hidden among the vineyards of Burgundy, busy with its own small interests, with no frequent communication with the rest of the world, and quickly adopting a stranger into its own narrow circle,—Hester must be there. The old selfishness,—a selfishness which he had been victoriously trampling under his feet for the last three months, rose up again strong and mighty. He would find Hester himself, saying nothing to Carl of this new, faint hope. Hester should owe to him all the help and consolation she could receive in her peculiar position of desolation and distress.

At Grant's door he stopped, declining to go in; for already his heart burned with a passionate desire to be upon the road, at the end of which he expected to find Hester. There was not even a vague hope within him that he should ever win her. He knew that upon the path he had to travel through life there was a point where the cross stood, upon which must be crucified his lost love, his lost hope. But he could not relinquish the sweetness of finding Hester himself alone; it might be the last sweetness and joy he should taste in all his intercourse with her. His love for her, deepened and purified by all these later sorrows, must never seek satisfaction,—except the satisfaction to which he had always been a stranger; that of surrendering itself, and consenting to be sacrificed to the happiness of the beloved one. But it was coming gradually to this in Robert's spirit; and with set face and heart he

travelled towards the threatening cross, only asking to gather one little flower at its foot.

"I am going away for a day or two, Carl," he said, pressing his hand convulsively; "I shall be back soon. Take care of my little Hetty. She will not miss me now you are here."

He hurried home and wrote a short note to his father, saying that he was going away upon business, for he did not wish to subject himself to any questioning; and with very little other preparation he set out by the first train on his journey to Burgundy.

CHAPTER LXIV.

IN THE SUNSHINE.

JOHAN MORLEY was in the condition of a man who has been dwelling underground for so long a period that he has almost forgotten the glory of the upper world. For him, in his gloomy and abandoned home, there had been no sweet influences of sunshine and breeze, no change of season, no opening of leaf-buds, no soft starry fall of snow. He had obstinately closed his senses to all the healing agencies of nature ; and with almost greater obstinacy he had steeled himself against the tender energy of religion. He had been voluntarily sojourning in "a land of darkness, as darkness itself, and of the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness."

Perhaps the first thing necessary for him was to re-awaken his sensibility towards outer influences. Grant had from the first recognized this necessity, and had urged him to take a long walk daily in the beautiful neighborhood surrounding Little Aston. But John Morley had not the moral courage and strength to break out of the dungeon where he was kept by Giant Despair. It was needful that the angels should lay hold upon him and bring him forth, and set him without the gates.

He was free then at last. He had come up from the depths. The wonderful sunshine of Burgundy dazzled him, but he felt its warmth and its light penetrate to the

very core of his heart. The great fountain of life sent electric currents through all his numbed veins. He could not think at first,—he was too bewildered. It was enough to stand by and look on with newly-opened eyes at the moving panorama surrounding him. Everything was new to him, and removed him by its novelty from the sorrowful memories of his old life. He scarcely spent an hour in-doors from early in the morning until the last bell rung at ten o'clock, when all the inhabitants of Ecquemenville thought it the right thing to retire peacefully into their own chambers. When he was weary of gazing up into the marvellous blue of the sky, he turned his rapt attention to the vineyards, where the grapes were deepening every day into a more purple tint. In the boulevards of the little town, which was almost deserted by the people, he spent every noontide in the shadow of its green aisle ; with the trees growing thickly on each side, and only opening here and there to give a glimpse of the shining waters of the river lapping against their deep-struck roots. As the fierce heat of the sun declined, he would return to the streets, where the inhabitants turned out of their dwellings in the cool of the evening to chatter and gossip, or flirt with all the gaiety and light-heartedness of the people of a warm climate. He was never tired of watching the groups which gathered on the pavements before the doors of the houses, who saluted him as he passed to and fro, with the grace and politeness of their country,—a politeness which he acknowledged with a strange smile upon his face. He could not understand a word they said, but this only added to the charm. Was he indeed the same sorrow-stricken man, whose dishonor had been upon every tongue, and who had had to shrink from the glance of every eye? He did not even ask himself this question ; he was too full of the novelty of the present moment.

Besides all this, he would come in at meal-times with a wholesome hearty appetite for the dainties the widow Limet provided for him and Hester. The widow Limet was put upon her mettle. She believed firmly that the English lived solely upon raw beefsteak and strong ale; and now that she had two of these benighted barbarians under her roof, she was fired with an ardent resolution to show them the mysteries and marvels of French cooking. Such friandises, such omelettes, such soups, such gâteaux, she placed upon the table, as would have made a gourmand's mouth water. She regretted sorely that it was not the season for the delicate vineyard snails, which were sold for a penny a-piece, even in the economical town of Ecquemenville, that she might have set a ragoût of them before monsieur and mademoiselle. For the honor of their country her neighbors picked out the finest of their fruit for the foreigners, and presented it in lavish profusion. From his first meal in the morning, consisting of a bowl of rich milk into which was poured a cupful of the very essence of coffee, with a dainty new-baked roll added to it; to his dinner at seven o'clock, with its four or five courses and generous wines, John Morley was fed upon the choicest of food. Diet makes a marvellous difference in a man's spiritual condition; and Hester, with her wise, observant eyes, learned some lessons in Ecquemenville which she would have failed to gather from the ascetic fare and lenten nutriment of their former mode of life.

But none of these outer things had the same influence over Hester. Her mind had not been suffering from a long malady, and could not therefore enjoy the almost sensuous pleasure of the change which was bringing health to her father. She was devoted to him; but, in spite of her devotion, her heart clung with bitter strength to the love of her own country, the love of old familiar places,

the love, scarcely acknowledged, of Carl. She did not think willingly of the last. They were separated by a miserable and irrevocable destiny. At times she was almost glad that no stronger tie bound them together than mere friendship,—a friendship, also, more implied than professed. If he had loved her, her duty would have been divided, but now it belonged solely to her father. What the final end of their present strange life would be, she could not by any effort foresee. Not a whisper reached them from that far-off place where all her years had been passed. Could it be possible that the course of events was going on as usual in Little Aston, which for her was as the buried cities of ancient times? Were the streets there still? Was her old home, the only home she had ever known, yet standing in its dark northern corner, where the sun never shone upon it? Was the chapel open Sunday after Sunday; and did the church bells chime as they were wont to do?

Hester's favorite place for indulging in these mournful questionings was the cool, lofty, solemn interior of the fine old church of Ecquemonville. She chose a chair for herself, where she was half hidden by a pillar; and there she sat, hour after hour, letting all the pageantry of Catholic ceremonials pass before her, but paying no heed to it. She heard the organs answering to one another in grand volumes of sound, which made her tremble, but she never asked herself why it was so. The worshippers respected the pale young Englishwoman, whose ascetic, saint-like beauty was in harmony with their own worship. No one spoke to her; a few offered her the holy water on the tips of their fingers as she passed in and out, and felt repaid by the sudden light in her grey eyes as she recognized the courtesy. She was adopted by them with a silent adoption; and the curé, a venerable old man, who had no

intention of making a convert of her, regarded her with a profound interest, which only waited for an opportunity to shape itself into language.

The vintage came, with its deepened mirth and hilarity ; and John Morley's force and energy had returned to him almost as if he had never wasted them in morbid brooding ; but Hester's silent longings were growing day by day more enfeebling. The fine balance of health was disturbed by her ceaseless conjectures as to both past and future. She had never renewed her conversation with her father about the circumstances of the night preceding their hurried flight from England. Rose was dead ; and amid her other troubled thoughts, it seemed very nearly a relief to think of her as one who has made the final escape from the evils of life. But she could not be sure that her father's hand was not guilty of her death. He had said it was not so ; but his reason had been so shaken at the time, that she could not trust implicitly to his word or memory. She could not yet gather courage to question him again. But who could be guilty, if not he ? It would be impossible to return to England, for their flight had fixed the crime upon him. If they ever set foot again in their native land, he would be called upon to expiate the death of Rose, either as a murderer or a madman. Oh, the exile ; the terrible banishment ! A home-sickness laid its chilly hand upon her ; and she felt that no life, however bright or joyous, could wean her from the yearning to see her own people, and hear her own language once again.

Long before reaching Ecquemonville, Robert Waldron knew his quest was successful. The driver of the diligence, to whom it seemed an extraordinary thing to have another Englishman as a passenger in so short a time after the arrival of John Morley and Hester, informed him that

two of his compatriots had made Ecquemonville their residence since the beginning of June. On being questioned, he described them as a man, with very white hair and seemingly of great age ; and a young lady, his daughter, very pretty, very amiable, and very sad. Robert could not doubt that these were the two he was seeking ; and his heart throbbed, as it had not done for some time past, with a feeling of satisfaction and happiness. Every step of the road brought him nearer to Hester, to whom he was carrying glad tidings. Whatever she had thought of her father's deed, it must be an infinite relief to her to hear that he had again escaped being guilty of a dark and cardinal sin. The way home was open to them ; they could return to it at any hour they pleased. He could not fail to be welcome, with such consolation as this.

Hester was sitting at the window, with her arms resting on the sill, looking listlessly down upon the dull street and market-square, which seemed stamped ineffaceably upon her brain. The diligence came in, and she saw the group of laundresses round the fountain pause as usual at their work, and the loungers throng round the conveyance, hiding the only traveller who descended from it. She was very heart-sick this afternoon ; and all this was nothing to her except one more scene in the shifting panorama of the streets. But an hour afterwards, as she still sat there, silent, spiritless, half broken-hearted, the stranger appeared on the uneven pavement below, coming swiftly towards her, with upraised face, and eyes fastened upon her. Hester caught convulsively at the window-sill, and leaned forward with a fascinated and incredulous gaze. Her father was in the room behind her, reading the only English book in their possession, a New Testament which she had carried from little Hester's bedroom to Carl's chapel ; and here, in the street below, close at the door, was Robert Waldron

who had seen her, knew her, and was hastening towards her.

Hester laid her head down upon the hands which grasped the window-sill, and felt an overwhelming, unutterable tremor of suspense. She could neither stir nor speak to give warning to her father; a vain warning it would have been, for already Robert's foot was upon the winding staircase which led up to their room. A cry only broke from her benumbed lips; but it was so smothered, that her father did not hear it. Step by step, each one adding to the intense strain upon her, came the approaching tread; and seemed to tarry at the door as if to lengthen out her anguish. She heard her father lay his book down, and knew that he was looking up to see who was coming. Then the door opened, and they stood face to face.

John Morley and Robert Waldron stood face to face, both alike stricken dumb. It was so long since they had seen one another thus directly, and so many changes had passed over both, that they recognized each other more by intuition than by positive recollection. There was so much also to be uttered by each of them that speech seemed altogether insufficient and powerless. They looked into one another's eyes, and no other gaze read the changeful, lamentable story of the past, as it flitted across their memories, and looked out in mournful glances at each other's face. Hester did not dare to lift her head, and look at them. She was waiting shrinkingly, to catch the first word.

"You have pursued and found me!" cried John Morley at last, in a voice which sounded clearly and coldly through the room, and fell in icy tones upon her ear.

"God forbid that I should harm you!" said Robert Waldron, in tremulous accents. "I come as your friend."

"Do you know what you have done for me?" asked John Morley again, after a long pause, as if both had exhausted themselves in the utterance of the first few words. "Let me tell you what you have done. I loved Rose as I never loved Hester's mother. I loved her with infatuation; with idolatry; against the voice of my conscience, against the voice of the church, against the inward voice of God. I knew she would bring no strength, no real joy to me, yet I loved her. I loved as Adam loved Eve, when he bartered paradise and righteousness for her. You never loved her one-half, one tenth as much."

"I never loved her at all," muttered Robert, unconscious of his own words.

"She might have learned to love me," he continued, mournfully, "she would at least have remained faithful to me, if you had not come between us. Because she was very fair to look upon, and facile to temptation, you tempted her, and I lost her. Yet you say you never loved her!"

"I was no better than a boy," answered Robert, urging the plea that had often soothed himself.

"A boy!" exclaimed John Morley, with a life-time of agony in his voice; "a boy! and Rose gave me up for you! Yet I know not which love was the greater sin, yours or mine. I lavished upon her an inordinate love. We both wronged the feeble creature by our passion, you and I."

"If it be possible for you to forgive me," cried Robert, "forgive me now."

"Forgive you!" he repeated; "ay, I have forgiven you both. God knows I forgave her before I found that she was dead."

"She is not dead," said Robert, in a hoarse voice, which almost failed him. Low as it was, it reached Hester's ear,

and she turned quickly round to see his face. How changed he was! how little like the gay, self-pleased handsome man she had last seen! He was looking at her father, almost unconscious of her presence, and his expression was one of poignant shame and remorse.

"Not dead!" echoed John Morley. "I laid her down, as gently as I could, upon her own little sofa, in her own room; but I tell you she was dead."

"We found her there," answered Robert. "Lawson's mother called Grant and me in, and she lay there like one dead; but there was life yet, and she is living now."

"Come here to me, Hester," cried John Morley; "let me hold your hand."

In an instant she was at his side, her arm about his neck, and her lips pressed again and again to his face. She could not speak at first, in her sudden excess of gladness. Rose was not dead, not murdered; and she saw clearly how free they were once more to return to England, to go back to Little Aston, to enter the old home again. She laid her head upon her father's shoulder, and sobbed, "Thank God!"

"How can it be?" said John Morley, in a tone of almost incredulous wonder.

"I will tell you," answered Robert, hurriedly; "the blow had just missed its most fatal aim, as it had done with me. You had but barely failed to kill her, as you missed murdering me two years ago."

"Me!" cried John Morley. "I desired to injure neither of you. "I never lifted up my hand against one or the other."

Robert Waldron made no answer; he was scarcely surprised at John Morley's denial; but Hester looked up into her father's face, and spoke entreatingly.

"Let us speak openly to one another now," she urged.

"You remember the stranger whom Grant brought into our house almost dead, about two years ago. Oh, you knew who it was, and who had struck that frightful blow? It was Robert Waldron, father. Did you not know it was Robert Waldron?"

"Stop," he answered, raising his hand to his head; "let me think all this over a little while."

They waited for a minute or two in unbroken silence, hearing the distant chatter of the laundresses about the fountain, and the tattoo of a drum being beaten at a great distance off. Hester, had sunk down on her knees beside her father, and rested her head against his arm. She could hardly endure the suspense, but she controlled herself; while Robert stood by, patient and immovable, willing to give John Morley what time he chose to collect his thoughts.

"I dare not think of it for long, even now," he said, his face, which had taken a hue of health, growing pale once more; "but listen to me, and I will speak as I would speak before God. I never knew till this moment that you had been under my roof. It was well I did not know. You had promised faithfully that you would never enter the street where I dwelt."

"I broke that promise," said Robert, as John Morley paused.

"It never came into my mind that you could break a solemn promise like that; the only penalty I demanded from you. I wished you no harm; I only wished to be left to my sorrow and dishonor. How Rose came there I do not know to this day. I believed Hester was gone to London to see her dying; and at first a superstition came across me. I could not help supposing that her spirit had come back to the home she had so cruelly and shamefully abandoned. How could Rose be there in the body?"

"Father," said Hester, "she was the poor creature we gave shelter to in the old nursery. She came to me one night as I left the chapel, poor, homeless, very ill, without hope in the world; and I remembered the promise you made me take long ago, before you married her, that I would be as her very own child to her. Don't you recollect? What else could I do for her?"

"Recollect!" said John Morley; "ay, I recollect. I understand it all now."

"I did right!" she murmured.

"Right!" he repeated, laying his hand fondly on her head; "you are always right, my daughter."

"We will talk about it at another time," he continued, after a brief silence. "It is too painful for me still. You say that she is alive, that no murder has been committed at all. Where is she now?"

"She is at home," answered Robert, and John Morley shook a little at the words; "we could not move her then, nor yet. She is still very feeble. What would you have had us do with her, when she was on the point of death?"

"That is enough," he said; "leave us now."

Robert looked sadly from him to Hester, and from Hester to him again. They were occupied with one another, and could spare no thought for him. Whatever they had to say to each other, whatever resolves and plans they might make, they wished to do it in his absence. He felt a vehement yearning to touch Hester's hand, to see her look at him once more, and to hear her speak to him; but she was clinging to her father, looking into his face, and speaking to him broken words of gladness. He found that he had no right there any longer, though he had been the messenger of the glad tidings; and with a quiet farewell, which scarcely fell upon their inattentive ears, he left them alone with one another and their new joy.

CHAPTER LXV.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN.

ROBERT WALDRON lingered a day or two, lounging about the dull little town, but not daring to force his self again into the presence of John Morley, unless he gave some sign that a second interview would be welcome. He had expected that they would have returned at once to England, but no places were taken in the diligence ; and he could not make up his mind to leave them there with an uncertainty as to what they meant to do. He wished to see Hester alone, but now she accompanied her father everywhere he went. The sultry heat of the summer was quite gone, and the clear bright autumn air breathed fresh exhilaration into veins which had grown languid through the fervor of the sunshine. Robert could see them from his window at the hotel whenever they quitted the house: John Morley, with a new vigor and strength, his white head held erect, his tread firm and steady ; and Hester, herself again, yet more than her former self, hopeful, bright, and courageous, ready to face any future, now that the heavy pressure of exile was passing away. What could they be about to do? He was undergoing a sore travail of heart, crucifying his best and most cherished hope. The gulf between him and Hester was too wide now, even to his own eyes, for it ever to be bridged over ; and he was striving to look across it, with a willingness to see her happy in an Eden to which he could find no entrance.

At last he bethought himself that he must go. The Hester who belonged to him was pining away in Little Aston, and he knew that she would soon be lost to him forever. Every hour that he wasted here, he lost some small tender trace of his child's character, which would be all that remained to him of her in a little while. Carl would be with her, he thought, bitterly, and Carl was loved more dearly than he was. Yet for his own sake he should be near her, to work out the whole of the heavy penance. But he could not leave without one effort to see Hester again, and to ask if he could render no help to her or her father. Fortunately he saw John Morley start out alone, the third evening after his interview with him, and make his way towards the rock which overlooked the town; and in a few minutes afterwards he presented himself at the widow Limet's door.

The widow Limet was giving Hester a lesson in spinning, in the dark cool room at the back of her shop, and the burr of the wheel made his step inaudible. He trod cautiously, and looked in through the half-open door for some time, glad to see Hester, while he remained unseen. Her face had caught a tinge of color, the rich bloom of a warm climate, and her eyes had brightened from their long period of gloom. She smiled more readily and talked more gayly, but still with an air of gravity, as if laughter had been too long a stranger to her lips to play about them as about other girlish faces. He fancied, but it could only have been fancy, that she had borrowed some of the coquettish graces of the countrywomen about her; her dress, the slight toss of her pretty head, the movement of her little foot upon the treadle, her whole attitude, had just the touch of careless consciousness of beauty which was the only charm she had needed. He knew now how well she would have played her part in his life of luxury

and elegance ; and he stood watching her, his heart contracting with a very bitter regret when the widow Limet caught sight of him, and betrayed his presence by a little vivacious shriek.

"I am about to return to England," he said, advancing with the pleasant graciousness of manner which he had at command ; "and I called to inquire if mademoiselle or her father have any commission there. For heaven's sake, Hester," he added, addressing her in English, "let me speak to you once more before I go. I cannot leave you thus."

"You can speak to me here," she answered ; "no one will understand you but me."

She had pushed aside her spinning-wheel, and risen to offer him her hand, which he had not touched for so long a time, and which he held in his like a treasure he would not willingly relinquish, though he was compelled to preserve an outward calmness.

"Come at least with me into yonder garden," he urged. "I cannot speak to you freely, and I dare not look at you while this woman is standing by."

The garden was a small square space, inclosed on every side, with the high wall of a convent at the end throwing one half of it into shadow ; a little green secluded spot, left to the wild luxuriance of growth under those warm skies. Without a word, Hester stepped out of the dark room into the glow of the evening sun, walking at his side with a measured step, and a grave set face, looking steadily forwards, without a glance up into his eyes.

"You hate me, Hester," he said. It was his first and chief thought when he saw how quickly her sunny grace had fled at the sight of him.

"No," she answered gently, but without raising her eyes to his as he had hoped ; "no I could never hate you."

"Yet it is I who have brought all the sorrow into your life," he continued.

"Yes," she said.

"Then you must hate me," he persisted. "If I had never lived, if I had died years ago, your life would have been as smooth as the life of other girls."

"Yes," said Hester.

"Yet you loved me once," he went on. "Do you remember how you sat on a footstool at my feet, holding my hand in yours, and slipped off my ring to try it on your own little fingers? It is this same ring, Hester."

He stretched out his hand to her, and she bent her eyes for a moment upon the diamonds flashing in the sunlight; but she looked away again steadily and sadly, her lips trembling, and a nervous quivering in her half-closed eyelids.

"Do you remember it?" he asked, thinking, not of the ring, but of the love she had borne for him.

"I remember it well," she murmured.

"My God! what a miserable fool I have been!" he cried, bitterly. "You loved me then, little Hetty."

"Yes," she said; "dearly."

"Dearly!" he echoed; "she loved me dearly; and it might have been, it might possibly have been, that she would have grown up loving me with her true, tender, faithful heart. Would that have been possible?"

"Yes," she answered, her voice faltering, and the tears standing in her steadfast eyes. Robert Waldron's passion, and the pain born of it, had been poignant enough before; but now it had reached a point when all further pain is akin to rapture. His martyrdom was awakening within him a heroism which was stirring with sharp blissful pangs of life through his whole spirit. Hester fixed her search

ing yet tender gaze upon him, with no deepening color on her cheeks, or look of shyness in her eyes.

"Yes," she said, softly, "I loved you dearly, and I can never hate you. I will not pretend to misunderstand you. You wish to know if that little child's love would have grown with my growth, had no barrier of your own raising come between us. I think it would. If there be any consolation or strength to you in the thought, I know that I should have loved you. Let that suffice for you. Be sure that I can never, never hate you."

Was it any consolation to him? It was a pain so exquisite at the moment, that he could not have answered the question to himself. They strolled together along the grassy walk of the garden, he wondering what words from his lips or hers would next stir the quiet air which seemed listening to them. The convent-bell rang for vespers, and a little babble of women's voices in the convent-garden followed it.

"Hester," he said, dropping his voice to a whisper, "I will make myself worthy of the love that might have been. Give me but one token of that old, childish love of yours."

"What token can I give you?" she asked, her clear eyes meeting his, frankly.

"This ring," he answered, "which you have so often slipped on to your own finger, let me put it on your hand now, and wear it for the sake of what might have been. Nay, I do not wish to trouble or frighten you, my darling. Do not turn away from me."

"I am not afraid of you," she answered, giving him her hand, which he held in his own for a moment or two, as he tried the ring upon her fingers, wondering all the while if it could be true that he was shut in there, in the small, sunny, silent garden, with no one near to him but Hester, and yet that for his very life he dare not press to

his lips the small hand on which he left his ring. Hester was looking at him, not at it.

"Now," he said, pushing back his disordered hair from his burning forehead, "let me tell you all that I have to say to you. Sit down here beside me, for I have very much to say."

She sat down at his side on a bank of turf under one of the walls, and he told her all that had befallen him from the moment when Lawson's mother summoned him and Grant to the help of Rose. He spoke very mournfully of his little child.

"I am very sorry for you," sobbed Hester, laying her hand, upon which glistened his ring, on his arm.

"I must go home to-morrow," he said; "and you, Hester, when shall you come?"

"I don't know," she answered; "my father and I have talked about it these three days, but he cannot resolve to return to the old life. You see how changed he is? How could he go back to his gloomy work, which is no real work at all, but a dreary idleness? Yet we must go back some time."

"You wish to come home," he said.

"Oh, with all my heart!" cried Hester, clasping her hands with girlish earnestness.

"Hester," he said, "I am much older than you. You may speak to me as you would speak to my father, or yours. Do you love Carl Bramwell?"

"Yes," she whispered, her face flushing into a deep crimson.

"God bless you both!" said Robert, after a moment's pause. "You will be very happy. Yes, you must come home again, and it must be soon. Leave it to me, Hester. Do not be troubled by your father staying here a while longer."

He loitered yet a few minutes, with Hester beside him, but neither of them said many words. Then she trod step by step with him down the soft grassy walk and through the house, standing at the door to look after him as he went his lonely way down the street. He turned to see her, and lifted his hat to her, with a forced smile which she was too far off to catch.

"It is very hard upon me!" he said to himself, with a groan.

CHAPTER LXVI.

GOOD NEWS FOR CARL.

JOHN MORLEY had desired to be alone, that he might confront a thought which had been haunting him ever since he had learned that Rose was not dead. His mind was no longer warped and blinded. With the vigor which had returned to his frame, there had come a clearness of judgment to his reason. Yet the sudden news that Rose lived had probed the old wound to its depths. As long as he had believed her dead his pardon of her transgression against him had been simple. Now a serious complication came into it. She was alive, and dwelling in the home she had forsaken,—the home to which he must soon return. His duty to Hester required that he should not keep her in this exile, to which she resigned herself through devotion to him. That his daughter loved Carl was apparent to him, and he had but little doubt that Carl loved her. Even if Robert Waldron did not disclose the secret of their hiding place, which need be kept as a secret no longer, it was his duty to return to his own town, and appear again among his townsmen. But Rose was there! And there too was the dreary life which had fallen from him suddenly as a burden loosened from his weary shoulders. Must he stoop to pick it up again? Must he keep Rose in his house and upon his hearth? He could not do that. He felt that though he might forgive her; though he did forgive her with all his heart; though there was still in

the depths of his nature a profound passion for his young wife who had been unfaithful to him ; he could never suffer her again to be to him what Hester's mother had been. There was an awful sadness in this. Rose dead had not been to him the terrible grief which Rose living would be. If he returned, he must look upon her fair face again, listen to her sweet voice, be shaken like a reed before her ; yet put her away inexorably, against all tears, all pleadings, all contrition. He could not ask Hester what he must do. How could his daughter understand this ? There was no alternative offered to him, except the selfish one of staying where he was in this pleasant retreat. But that would be unjust to Hester, whose home-sickness was known to him. A sharp conflict, quickly ended, was fought in his spirit. When he returned to the house of the widow Limet, he told Hester that they would start for England in a few days.

During the three past days Hester and her father had had many confidential conversations. The mystery of the attack made upon Robert, and the similar one by which Rose had well-nigh perished, had been fully discussed between them. It had not been any mystery to Hester until now. She had been as fully convinced as Grant and Robert, that her father had been the stealthy assailant in the first instance ; and there had been scarcely a doubt upon her mind that he had also attacked Rose in a paroxysm of madness and despair which had made him unconscious of his own deed. But now that he emphatically maintained his innocence, and narrated circumstantially the details of his finding of Rose already dead, as he supposed, she could not withhold her credence. By repeated and strenuous efforts of his memory, the recollection came back to him of having heard Lawson closing the side-door which gave him access to his work-rooms, and this he told

to Hester. He had not been alone in the house then. Lawson had been there ; and it must have been he who had been the secret and vindictive foe. No one knew as she did the profound hatred Rose had aroused in him, even before her marriage with his master. To no one else had he displayed it. There came back to her mind his wild, half-crazy denunciations of her ; his superstitious visions of her own mother's presence, which had ceased when Rose usurped her place in the household. The criminal could be no other than Lawson.

But Robert on his part was speeding away for England, with his conviction in no way shaken that it was John Morley's hand which had been lifted up against himself and Rose. His denial of the crime seemed perfectly natural, and almost justifiable, to him ; it had been quiet and brief, a mere parenthesis in a conversation. Besides, he was convinced he had no other enemy, not merely in Little Aston, but in all England itself. He still considered himself as having been placed more on a level with John Morley by this double attempt at revenge. He did not see any reason why, where there was so much mutually to forgive, John Morley could not be fully reconciled to his penitent wife. They must leave Little Aston, of course ; but London would afford them a residence, where their former life would be altogether unknown. It was in his father's power to procure a post as secretary or librarian for John Morley ; and they could live somewhere near Carl and Hester, and be very happy after all. It seemed as if he were doomed to pay the heaviest penalty himself.

He reached Little Aston towards the close of the second day, having stopped nowhere on his journey. Grant's house was on his way to Aston Court, and he turned in to see his little Hester for a minute. It was a week since he had left her, and consumption takes rapid strides some-

times. He was afraid to inquire from the servant how the child was, but passed on quickly to the room where he had seen her last. It was empty. Even the cushions and pillows, which had been piled up on the sofa to make it softer for her feeble little frame, had been removed, as if she no longer occupied this place. His heart contracted with a terrible dread. The fatherly instinct, so strong in Mr. Waldron, had been quickly and strongly developed in himself. How dear the child had been to him, how firm and close a hold she had laid upon his affection, he had scarcely known till this moment. He turned sharply round and demanded where Mrs. Grant was. She was up stairs in the room which had formerly been Carl's study. Robert hastened there, and entered it abruptly.

Annie was not in the room, but Carl was there, looking pale and suffering, his eyes wearing an expression of a continual anxiety. He was standing at the window, which faced westward, watching the sun set, but not really seeing it; for his troubled thoughts were far away from any object his gaze rested upon. He turned as Robert entered, and came forward to greet him.

"Where is Hester," asked Robert, in a broken voice.

"Hester!" cried Carl. "How can I tell? Would to God I knew."

"But my little Hetty," said Robert; "you know where she is, Carl. She is not dead!"

"No," answered Carl, with a look of profound sympathy; "your little girl is not dead. She is living still; but we have taken her to her mother. She pined to go to her, as soon as she knew she was in this neighborhood; and Rose entreated to have her. She is gone to die in John Morley's house."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Robert; "then I cannot see her, I cannot nurse her again."

He felt that it would be utterly impossible for him to visit John Morley's house with Rose in it ; to watch with her the child's coming death. How could he bear to face Rose in the presence of their dying child ? No ; he had lost the little creature, so lately found, whose life had been cold and desolate through his sin. He felt a momentary anger that they should have stolen her away from him, during his absence ; but it died away as Carl spoke again.

" I thought of that," he said ; " but what else could we do ? The mother's claim is the strongest. She has been a living child for Rose these many years ; you have known her only a few months. Besides, Hetty pined and grieved about it. She would not have been living now if we had not yielded. You were gone, and we did not know when you might return."

It was done, and could not be undone, even if he had wished it. She was as surely separated from him, for the short period that still remained of her life, as if the grave had closed over her. Yet Carl had acted well ; had done precisely what a true and tender nature dictated. He could not blame him. No reproof could fall upon any one except himself.

" Carl," he said, after a long silence, " I have found Hester."

" Hester ?" he cried again, starting violently, and grasping Robert's arm. " What did you say ? You have found Hester ?"

" Yes, Hester and John Morley," he answered, almost reluctantly.

Carl could not articulate a syllable, but gazed with mingled incredulity and beseeching into Robert's face. He could not believe his own ears ; yet there came a chilly recollection across him of Lawson's words, " I have a notion that Robert Waldron knows where she is." Now he

said that he had found them ! He had been absent for a week, and had seen Hester ! Carl scarcely knew whether to seize him by the throat, or cast himself upon his knees before him, to extort this precious knowledge from him. He knew where Hester was ; she who as truly belonged to him as if he had secured her troth. For did she not belong to him ? What right had this rich, prosperous man, the favorite of the world and of fortune, to come between him and her ? Was not every principle of justice and fitness opposed to the possibility of his possessing Hester ? Hardly a moment had passed since Robert had uttered his reluctant tidings, and these thoughts had only flashed through Carl's brain, when he spoke again more freely and heartily.

"I discovered where they were from a hint dropped by Lawson's mother, who knew nothing herself of their place of concealment. They fled to her native place, a little town in Burgundy. I went there to make sure that my guess was correct ; and found myself right. Of course they had never heard any news from England, and heaven knows how long they might have hidden there, for John Morley had no idea but that Rose was dead. He denies the crime, and he denies ever striking me ; but then why did he flee ? He is not quite sane yet. He is unwilling to return to England, though Hester suffers from her long trouble. She is home-sick ; you can see it plainly ; and she is longing to come back."

"I must go to them," interrupted Carl, taking a stride towards the door, as if he would set off the same instant.

"I knew you would," said Robert, in an accent of relief and regret. "Yes ; go. You will prevail with him, and take care of her. But stay ; I must give you fuller directions as to how you are to find them ; and you cannot

leave here before the first train in the morning. What a happy fellow you are!"

He uttered the last words with a smile, sadder than many tears are. Carl was arrested and quieted by it. He descended from the height of his own unexpected joy to enter into the desolation and loneliness of Robert Waldron. They talked together until long after the sun had gone down; and then parted with a friendship between them which would last their life-time.

CHAPTER LXVII.

TO BURGUNDY.

WITH Robert's very minute directions, and with the certainty of finding Hester at the end of his journey, Carl felt no sort of hesitation or embarrassment at the idea of passing through a country, the language of which was altogether unfamiliar to him. He knew two or three dead languages, but he had no practical knowledge of French, and could not comprehend a word addressed to him by any of his fellow-passengers, or the railway officials ; but as far as Paris his ignorance did not prove inconvenient. He crossed the Channel and sped up to Paris as swiftly as steamers and railways could take him ; but it appeared the slowest mode of transit it had ever been his lot to experience. An interpreter accompanied the train and expedited his passage through Paris to the Lyons Railway Station, from which was the line running through Burgundy. He knew how long it would be before he could reach the small station, which Robert had described to him, and where he would find a diligence plainly inscribed with the word "Ecquemonville." He would have nothing to do but seat himself in it, put six francs into the hand of the driver ; and there would be no longer any difficulty to surmount in fulfilling his mission. After that Hester would be his interpreter. But if there had been a thousand difficulties, multiplied by a thousand dangers, he was ready to confront them all to find her at the end of them.

The country through which he was passing received but small attention from him ; though now and then he started, as if aroused from a slight slumber, to give a brief glance at the long valleys, and broad table-lands he was traversing. He promised himself to survey them more carefully on his return, when Hester and her father were with him. One question agitated him very greatly. Was it true that John Morley was innocent of any attempt to avenge himself either upon Rose or Robert Waldron? So far as his liability to earthly judgment and punishment was concerned, he ran no risk of being called upon to expiate his crime. Circumstances had singularly favored the criminal. But Carl longed to believe that the hand of Hester's father was free from every stain. His mind was tossed from one thought to another in a tumult of hope and apprehension, until he found that the train began to slacken speed at the time when they should be approaching the station where he was to alight.

The train had been shunted into a siding to wait until another, bound for Paris, had started from the little station. It was passing them slowly, and his glance, now on the alert, fell upon the last compartment of a second-class carriage, as it glided by. There sat—he could not by any chance be mistaken—John Morley, but erect, vigorous, and sun-burnt, with an unwonted energy in his face, and beside him was Hester, whose full face, he could not see as it was turned towards her father, but whose delicate profile was too familiar to him ever to be forgotten. An instant only did this vision of her last, for the train was getting up its speed, and almost as he saw her she was lost to his sight again.

Carl's first impulse was to thrust himself half out of the window, and to shout after the receding train ; but he restrained himself, and waited until his carriage-door was

unlocked. Without doubt this was the station he had booked for ; the ticket was taken from him, and he alighted mechanically. He stood motionless, gazing down the long straight line of railway, narrowing to a vanishing point at a great distance off, along which he could yet see the film of smoke fading away into the blue air. A few other travellers had descended from the train, but they did not disperse hastily as in England. They lingered instead, staring hard at this handsome young foreigner, who stood immovable in an attitude of dismay. When Carl awoke to his ludicrous position, he found himself surrounded by a group of country-people, whose eyes and mouths were wide open, and seemed little likely to close again.

He lifted his hat from his beating temples, to let the cool air play about them ; and the Frenchmen, not to be outdone in politeness, removed theirs, standing round him bareheaded in the glowing sunshine. Carl was half beside himself with disappointment and embarrassment.

"Is there nobody here that can speak English?" he exclaimed pathetically. This was an utterly unforeseen crisis, full of difficulty and anxiety ; at the moment he would have exchanged all his scholarly knowledge of dead languages for as good an acquaintance with colloquial French. Where was the train that had just disappeared bound for? Was it going to Paris, or was John Morley carrying away Hester to some still more obscure hiding-place than Ecquemenville? This last was possible, if he was not quite sane, and was unwilling to return to Little Aston. Or perhaps they intended to go back to Ecquemenville. The driver of the diligence very probably knew that, and where they had taken tickets for ; but how could he communicate with him? He was too deeply absorbed in these reflections to care very greatly for the unblinking eyelids and unabashed stare of the breathless spectators

about him, each one of whom seemed afraid he should miss some eccentricity of the Englishman's behavior.

"*How* doyedo?" said a voice at Carl's side, dwelling long upon the first word and running the other three into one. He turned quickly round and saw a bright but sal-low face, with black hair drawn tight from it, and confined by a pretty little white cap. The eyes meeting his were dark, and smiled with a somewhat anxious expression, as the speaker awaited the effect of her salutation.

"Thank heaven you can speak English!" exclaimed Carl, fervently, taking the little woman's hand eagerly into his, and looking down upon her with a flush of gladness upon his embarrassed face.

"*How* doyedo?" she inquired again, with greater confidence.

"Oh, quite well, thank you!" said Carl, rapidly. "I want to know where yonder train is going to?"

He pointed down the line, where the last streak of smoke was quickly vanishing, and she followed the direction of his finger with her bright eyes, but there was an expression of uneasiness in them.

"I you no comprends no," she said, shaking her head anxiously; "*how* doyedo?"

"I want to know," persisted Carl, "if that train is going to Paris?"

He pronounced the word Paris well enough for her to understand it, and she caught at it quickly. But he had come direct from there, and could not wish to return, she thought.

He continued pointing down the line, and repeating his question, "Is it going to Paris?"

"No, no," she answered, shaking her head emphatically, and afterwards waving her hand comprehensively about the surrounding country, "*non, non ; pas à Paris.*"

The audience were enjoying this unintelligible interview with great zest ; but Carl's hope had perished altogether. Hester was lost to him at the very time he had expected to find her. He sighed a heavy sigh of vexation and perplexity ; but he could not help smiling at the solicitude of the little Frenchwoman, who looked into his face with an air of disappointment.

" *How doyedo ?* " she repeated, with a desire to afford him a forlorn comfort by her knowledge of his language.

He answered only by another troubled smile, and broke through the circle surrounding him. There was a time-table near the window of the ticket office, and by dint of profound and repeated study Carl made sure that there was no train to Paris stopping at the little station until the same hour the next day. He pointed it out to his new friend, and made her understand that he must return to Paris by that train. In the meantime she took him into her charge, and conducted him to a hotel, where he was entertained with the utmost hospitality and curiosity. But he was too fully occupied with anxious thoughts concerning John Morley and Hester to be conscious either of kindness or inquisitiveness. His anxiety grew almost intolerable before the moment came when he seated himself in the train which was to convey him back to Paris.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

AT HOME AGAIN.

FOUR days after Robert Waldron returned to Little Aston, John Morley and Hester were on their way thither. They were going home gladly ; yet with a solemn gladness, for a dark shadow fell across the future. The thought of Rose was upon both their hearts. How could they meet her ? In what relationship could she stand to them in the future ? Even Hester felt the terrible weight and difficulty of this question. She clung more closely to her father in this time of conflict, and scarcely gave Carl a thought as they were passing through London. He left all the arrangements of their journey to her ; and she, with the intolerance of suspense natural to her years, would not stop for rest on the way. But both of them shrank from the idea of being recognized at Little Aston station ; so they left the train about two miles from it, at a village where neither of them was known.

It was a soft, dark, soundless night of autumn, with no breeze abroad to rustle the dying leaves. The air was heavy and scented, with a languor in it which oppressed the spirits, and caused Hester to sigh often, with a painful and unconquerable depression. All the silence and utter stillness, the muteness of the quiet hedgerows, where the birds uttered no sleepy chirp as they do in spring and summer when a footfall disturbs them in their nests, the hush of the dark funereal trees which made no stir or murmur over-

head ; all this silence seemed ominous. She wanted a little whisper of welcome and encouragement. If her father had been indeed a murderer, skulking under the black shadows of the trees for concealment, there could not have been a more condemning hush and dumbness of all nature as he passed by. The sky above them was shrouded by one unbroken cloud, through which neither moon nor star looked down upon them. For a hundred yards or so a little wayside brook gurgled along their path with a pleasant and soothing babble, but it also soon forsook them, and turned aside into the meadows, leaving the road more cheerless by its desertion.

John Morley was silent too ; but if she could have seen his face she would have been alarmed at the strong passions which furrowed it. This was the walk he had most often taken with Rose ; in those early days when he was lavishing a wealth of love upon her, and when he believed himself beloved again, because her treacherous blue eyes had been bent upon him, dewy with a feigned and false tenderness. Every step was bringing him nearer his home, and nearer her presence in his house. Even now he could have turned and fled again ; fled back to that pleasant and sunny valley in Burgundy, where no man knew his dishonor. But Hester was by his side, though he was but half conscious of her nearness, and had but a vague sense of his complete wretchedness without her. It was when they came in sight of the town-lamps, and their own street lay before them, that he arrested his steady step for an instant, and lifted her hand reverently to his lips, murmured "God bless you, my daughter."

The chapel stood at their left hand, and Hester drew her father into the shadow of its great portico, where she had found Rose homeless and friendless. They stood behind the pillars, hand pressed in hand, pausing for a

little while before making the last stage of their journey. Opposite to them, in the garret where Lawson and his mother lived, there twinkled the faint glimmer of a candle in the uncurtained window, which was too high to be overlooked.

"Father," whispered Hester, pressing his hand more warmly ; "let me go and get Lawson's key, and then we can enter our home without going in at the house door. You can turn into your own room, while I see where she is. It is late, and she may be already asleep ; or she may be gone back to the old nursery. You need not see her to-night. Take some rest first ; and you will feel better."

John Morley answered only by releasing her hand, and she left him in the chapel portico. Very quick but softly she mounted the familiar staircase, and pushed open the door of the garret. Lawson was alone, leaning back in a large old chair, and looking very ill and worn. His dark eyes burned under his grey eyebrows, and his hollow cheeks were of an ashy paleness : his hair was greyer and his eyes redder and more sunken than when she had seen him last. She had advanced half-way across the room before he perceived her entrance.

"Miss Hester !" he cried, in a tone of terror.

"Yes ; it is Hester, dear old Lawson," she said ; "Hester come back ; and her father. He is waiting outside for me. I am come here for your key, so that we may get in home without letting anybody know."

"She is there," he answered, in a hoarse and hollow voice.

"We know it," said Hester ; "I think I know all about it, Lawson. There is nobody in the world who knows it all as I do. You used to love me very dearly, and my mother too. But oh, how could you be so cruel, so wicked ! See what sorrow it brought upon me ! I think I should almost

have died of home sickness, if we had not known soon that we could come home safely."

She uttered her reproaches in a tender yet penetrating tone; and Lawson laid his palsied head upon the table before him, groaning bitterly. He made no attempt to answer her; but when he lifted his face for an instant to look at her, she was shocked at its expression of suffering and despair.

"Are you ill, dear old Lawson?" she asked.

"I have my medicine here," he answered, tapping a small box which lay close to his hand.

"I cannot stay now;" she said, "my father is waiting for me. I see the key is hanging up in its old place. Good-bye, Lawson. Come down and see me alone in the morning; alone, you know."

She lingered for a minute to see if he would look up, or speak to her once more, but he did not; and she hurried away and out in the street again to her father.

They walked down the quiet street side by side, and in silence, for their hearts were too full for speech now. Their tread was hushed and measured, as though they formed part of a funeral procession. On either hand the tall houses were dark and full of gloomy shadows, which moved fitfully as they passed by in the flickering light of the few and feeble lamps. The strip of sky overhead was breaking into a multitude of small clouds, and the moon, which was on the wane, looked down with a pale and hurried gleam through the rifts before the clouds closed speedily again over its mournful face. Their steps, slow before, slackened as they drew nearer to their old home, and stopped altogether as they stood opposite to it, looking up to its dark gables traced against the obscure sky. Of all who had ever gazed at the decayed and dingy dwelling, none had ever looked with such eyes as theirs.

A shiver passed through them both, as if some deadly miasma had breathed upon them from the deserted and dishonored house. Yet it was their home, the only home Hester had ever known; the home to which John Morley had brought her mother, and that second wife of his who had disgraced it by her sin. They stood opposite to it, two dark shadows in the gloom, scarcely daring to venture across the narrow street and invade the solemn solitude, if solitude indeed were there, of the empty house.

"Come," said Hester at last, grasping her father's hand again, and leading him like a child across the street. The door by which Lawson entered his workroom was gained by an outer staircase, like that leading to the nursery, and it brought them on to the second floor of the building. Hester unlocked it and threw it open, a damp, cold, earthy air greeting them. The darkness was unbroken blackness within; but there was no danger that they should stumble upon the floor their feet had trodden so often. Yet John Morley stood within the closed door, rooted and immovable, while Hester found Lawson's match-box and kindled a light. She came back to him and looked into his face. It had quite lost its new-born air of resolve and strength; and he stood with his head drooping once more, and his shoulders bowed, an old and decrepit man. She put both her arms fondly about his neck, and forced him to look at her.

"Have we done wrong in returning here?" she asked. "Do you feel sorry we came back?"

"No, no," he answered; "we have done well. It is but a passing paroxysm, a dread which is almost over. In a minute or two I shall be myself again. I will go to my own room, Hester."

He put his arm through hers, and leaned heavily upon it as she led him across the empty workrooms. They

found the door into the house unfastened, though a bolt was upon it which had never been there in their time. It opened at one end of the long, dark passage which ran in a straight line through the middle of the house. At the other end was the door of Rose's drawing-room, standing wide open, and sending a broad, bright stream of light into the darkness. Almost involuntarily Hester extinguished her candle, and drew her father's arm more closely through her own, thinking to gain his room unseen. But John Morley did not stir, and she could catch, in the glimmer which reached them, the flashing of his eyes as he gazed steadily into the lighted room. There was the sound of a footfall passing to and fro on the carpeted floor, but no one came into sight; and after a minute or two John Morley whispered into his daughter's ear.

"I must see her," he said; "let us go forward softly. Even if she discovers me here, I must see her this night."

With stealthy footsteps, as if they had no right to be in their own home, they crept along the passage until they could command the view of half the room within. It was many years since Hester had looked into it, and she had grown from childhood to womanhood since; but to her eye there was but little change. Yet at one corner stood a little bed—she recollected it as her own—but it was not occupied. The child who had been sleeping in it was now being carried to and fro about the room, in the arms of her father, Robert Waldron.

CHAPTER LXIX.

THE LAST MOMENT.

WHEN Carl told him that little Hester was gone to her mother, Robert believed that his child was lost to him altogether. He could not meet Rose in her husband's house ; he could not even visit his child there. Mr. Waldron went every day to spend an hour or two with the little granddaughter, whom he could not acknowledge, but who fastened the more closely about his heart. He spoke very gently to Rose, and with a reverence he had not accorded to her in the days when she had been a favorite with him, in spite of her girlish frivolity. The consecration of a great sin, purified by a great sorrow, was upon her. Now and then he addressed to her the few hearty words of fellowship and encouragement by which a true man, who is also a Christian, can bind up the broken in spirit ; but they did not converse much. The thoughts of both were centred upon the child whose life was swiftly running to its close. From the moment that she entered under John Morley's roof, they saw that her days were numbered ; and on the morning of this day, when John Morley and Hester were hastening homewards, Grant counted the duration of her life by hours.

It was then that little Hester, growing conscious of a change in herself, began to think of those who had made the last few months a holiday to her. Carl was gone away and she should see him no more ; but Annie could come

to bid her farewell, and Robert Waldron, who had never been to see her since she had come to be with her mother. She asked Mr. Waldron himself, as he stooped over her bed, the tears in his eyes, and a strange pressure upon his throat.

"Why doesn't he come?" she said. "He used to be very kind to me. If you'd only tell him little Hester is going to die very, very soon, I'm sure he'd come. I loved him very much; almost as much as Carl."

"He shall come to see you, my little child," said Mr. Waldron.

So Robert came at last; back to the pleasant room, where pleasant and guilty hours had passed quickly for him and Rose—hours which had sown deadly seeds broadcast. He could not fly from it now; he could not make haste to leave it behind him. Hester—his child—was dying, and he was not coward enough to desert her death-bed. Rose was there, but he scarcely saw her, scarcely spoke to her. They met for the last time in the presence of their child, but they met as strangers; only one short, quick glance into one another's eyes told their tale of agony and repentance.

"Don't leave me again," moaned little Hester; "I shall die soon; and, oh, I am very tired. Could you carry me about in your arms for a little while?"

This had been her cry from time to time during the day; and Robert, cradling her tenderly in his arms, had paced about the room, gathering up all the scattered memories which lay in ambush for him behind every familiar object upon which his eye rested. How he loathed himself! How he wondered at his own idiotic sin! With what sharp unutterable pangs every word and moan of the dying child pierced him to the heart! The martyrdom was keener to him than to Rose, whose feebleness softened the

anguish of her soul. She was going to follow very quickly ; but he would live for many years, with the image of a white face, and small, emaciated limbs, and the echo of a little feeble voice, dwelling forever in the depths of his memory.

It was upon this agony and passion of retribution that John Morley looked, himself unseen, and reading the whole story with his keen and quickened eyesight. There was Robert Waldron, his head bowed down over the form of his dying child, and his heavy feet treading to and fro under his burden ; as his own had done in the room below, with a burden as heavy bending down his head. Rose had fallen asleep for sorrow, and was unconscious of the nearness of both of them. She was lying upon the sofa, with a shawl thrown over her ; but her head was uncovered, and the light fell upon it. He could see every line traced upon her corpse-like face. If one element of repentance consists in not thinking over again the sins of the pleasant past, it was long since Rose had ceased to dwell upon them. Her husband's heart yearned to her with a great pity, with a passionate tenderness which no other woman had ever stirred within him. She slept, and he would not have her awake. If she had been dead he would not have wished her alive again. But he had never loved her, never grieved for her, as he did now.

It might have been that the bitter sigh which was in his heart rose unbidden to his lips, or that he or Hester made some movement of which they were unaware, for Robert paused suddenly in his dreary march, and turned towards them, peering anxiously into the darkness. The child, too, lifted her feeble head and bent it forward. Hester could restrain herself no longer. With a swift and noiseless step, and with her finger raised in a gesture of silence, she glided into the room, leaving her father still

standing without, and took the little child out of Robert's arms. Little Hester nestled down upon her lap, breathing a sigh of measureless content, and gazing up into the sweet face bent over her with a flitting smile upon her own. Robert Waldron knelt down before them both, and felt that the supreme moment of his martyrdom had come.

"Dear Hester," murmured the child, "you are just in time. I've been here having my holidays before I die. But I'm going to die now, very quickly. Did you know, and are you come on purpose?"

"I did not know you were here, my darling," answered Hester. "This is my own home."

"Yes, I know," she said, plaintively; "my mother told me you used to live here when you were as old as me. Was it then you knew my father?"

Hester's pitiful gaze was bent upon Robert, but he could not bear to meet it. He covered his eyes, and bowed his head until it almost rested upon her feet.

"Yes; it was then that I knew him," she answered, very softly.

"I shall know him soon," said little Hester, in a tone of exultation; "very, very soon. I am going to heaven, and I shall see God there; and Jesus Christ, who loves little children so. But He won't be jealous if I love my father very, very much; because I've never known him here, and couldn't love him. You don't think God will be angry, or Jesus Christ, do you, Hester?"

"No no," she answered, the tears falling fast upon the child's thin hand.

"Hester! Hester!" cried Robert in an accent of profound anguish.

"Which does he mean?" she asked, touching his bowed head playfully. "There are two of us now. Is it me, or the other Hester, you are calling to? I don't know

what we should do if I was going to live. But I'm very glad, after all, to be going to my own father."

She lay still for a few minutes, as if exhausted, looking up to Hester with a gaze of utter satisfaction. Grant, whom Hester had not seen until then, came forward and shook his head gravely as he felt the failing pulse in the languid little wrist, which he put down gently after he had held it for a few seconds. She turned her eyes away from Hester's face for a moment to look at him.

"You've all been very good to me," she murmured. "You've given me such holidays as I never thought of; but it is too late now; and I'm not sorry. I don't want anybody to be very sorry. Shall you be very sorry?" she added, touching Robert's head again with her cold little hand.

His heart was dead within him, and he neither spoke nor lifted up his face, though she waited for an answer. Rose was awake now, and was creeping towards them, holding by the chairs to steady her failing and faltering steps; while John Morley looked on, seeing all, hearing every word of the child's dying voice, and comprehending every turn of the brief history which was ending thus.

"I don't know what to call you," said the child. "They have all names but you; and I love you very much. I think I love you as much as Carl. If my father had not died, perhaps he would have carried me about like you've done, in your arms. Are you so tired that you cannot look at me?"

"He is not tired," said Hester; "he is too sorry to look at you."

"I don't want him to be so very sorry," she moaned, her lips quivering with grief; "nor anybody else, nor my mother. Tell him not to be like that, Hester. Tell him to look at us. I want to see his face again, because I love him."

"Robert," said Hester, "look at her."

Her voice was almost lost in sobs, and she laid her hand, as the child had done, upon his bowed head. He lifted it up then, and glanced first at her, then at his little daughter, with a look of anguish, such as she had never seen even upon her father's face.

"Why," faltered the child, in broken sentences, "do you think I love Carl the most now? I only loved him most because I knew him first. See, I love you quite as much. Kiss me, and let us be friends before I die. I wish I'd known you all my life, because then I might have loved you most of all. But it wouldn't be right now, would it."

She had put her hand to his face, and was stroking it fondly; and Robert seized it, and held it passionately to his lips.

"You love me very much," she whispered, "very much. I wonder if my father would have loved me any more! But I shall soon know. Why, there's my mother leaning over our chair, Hester."

Hester had felt Rose beside her for the last minute, but she had not dared to stir for fear of disturbing the easy position of the dying child. Rose spoke in a shrill yet feeble voice, which smote upon John Morley's ear.

"I must tell her," she cried. "Robert! Hester! I must tell her."

"No, no! not now! never, now!" answered Robert.

"Would you like to see your father before you die?" asked Hester, bending more fondly over the little girl.

"I cannot," she said, with a bright glance; "he is waiting for me up in heaven. And my mother says she won't be very long. Let everybody kiss me quickly, for I am going."

She almost raised herself up on Hester's lap, and

looked eagerly about her. Grant was standing before her, but she looked past him to the open doorway and the obscure passage beyond, where John Morley's white head stood out clearly in the gloom. She raised her hand slowly, pointing towards him; and Rose, turning her eyes in that direction, saw the face of her husband looking towards her in this hour of his vengeance.

"Let him come first, and kiss me," said the child, in her dying voice.

John Morley advanced steadily into the room, with every eye fixed upon him intently; Robert alone knowing nothing of what little Hester's words meant, for he had again bowed his head down almost to the ground at Hester's feet. Rose watched her husband; and Hester's imploring gaze never left his face. If there were any bitterness and rancor in his heart now, it would be there forever. No punishment, no remorse could satisfy him if he was not satisfied at this moment. He did not look at Rose, but his eyes were fastened upon the small, wan face resting upon Hester's arm. The little face smiled up at him, and the little hands were stretched out to him.

"You would love me too, if you only knew me," she said. "Kiss me once before I die."

He stood between his wife and Robert Waldron now; he could have laid a hand upon each of them. But he looked only at the child, his eyes fast growing dim, and with an unspeakable compassion in his heart. Resting his hand upon Hester's shoulder, and stooping over Rose's dying child, he laid a long, gentle kiss upon her lips; a kiss which meant more than any words could have said.

"My father will kiss me like that," murmured the failing voice; and Robert raised himself up to look at her once more. The last moment was come. The last kiss her chilling lips could feel had been imprinted there by

Rose's husband. He groped about with his hands for an instant, as if to catch at some solid support, and then he fell forward fainting at John Morley's feet.

For an instant no one stirred. John Morley leaned heavily upon Hester's shoulder ; but when Grant bent over the senseless form, he pushed him gently on one side, and stooping down he raised Robert in his arms, with a woman's tenderness of touch, and carried him into his own room and laid him upon his own bed.

CHAPTER LXX.

A FULL FORGIVENESS.

GRANT removed the dead child from Hester's lap, and bade her take Rose down stairs to her father's sitting room. Rose shed no tears, but appeared calm and almost apathetic. Hester, carrying a light in her trembling hand, led the way to the gloomy room, where John Morley's life had been wasted. There was a chilly sense of vacancy about it then, for all the every-day confusion had been carefully put into frigid order by Lawson's mother. Hester set Rose down in the old chair on the hearth, and busied herself for some time in lighting the fire ; while she sat by, watching her movements with dull but tearless eyes. The rare refined beauty of Hester's face, pale with suppressed emotions, had never shown itself as it did now. When the fire had burned up, she brought a footstool to the side of Rose, and sitting down, weariedly laid her head upon her lap. The fond, daughter-like attitude, the sweetness of Hester's wan face, the utter oblivion of her step-mother's sin, expressed by her silence, roused Rose from her stupefaction. She laid both her hands upon Hester's head, and hiding her face upon them burst into a passion of tears.

"Why are you so good to me?" she cried. "Why was I ever born? You would have been happier if you had never seen me, little Hetty. Oh, little Hetty! little Hetty! why did I ever come into this house to be a sorrow

to you? Oh, I did not think it would all end in this. And yet you love me through it all!"

"Yes; I love you dearly, poor mother," said Hester, in her softest accents.

"Then you think God will love me in spite of all," murmured Rose.

"I am sure He does," she answered.

"And my husband?" she continued, in a voice of mingled entreaty and incredulity.

"Yes; my father loves you," said Hester; "he forgives you. He has come back knowing you were here. He is taking care of Robert Waldron now. Hush! they are coming down stairs."

They listened breathlessly to the sound of footsteps descending the staircase. Would they come in here, both John Morley and Robert Waldron, and meet Rose face to face? She pressed her hand against her heart, praying silently to God to spare her this trial. The door was open, and they could hear distinctly all that was passing in the old-fashioned entrance-hall. Grant had come down with them, and said he would walk home with Robert. Then Robert spoke, in a troubled, scarcely articulate voice.

"John Morley," he said, "I have sinned grievously against you, and I can do nothing to atone for it to you. Yet I have suffered for my sin, and repented of it with a very bitter repentance. Can you pardon me?"

"As freely as God pardons us all," answered John Morley, in a clear tone. "Yet it may be you will have to bear the consequences of your sin all your life long. But if at any time I can help you to bear that burden, by counsel, by sympathy, by prayer, come to me and let us talk together as friend with friend. You are young yet; young enough to do good work in the world. God bless you and give you peace!"

There was a minute's silence in the outer room, and then the house-door closed upon Grant and Robert ; and John Morley's foot took a step or two towards his own forsaken parlor. Hester looked up into Rose's face, and saw it flushed and kindled with a new light. He, who had forgiven Robert freely and with a blessing, was coming towards her, his wife, whom he had loved with a profound passion. Neither of them moved, except that Rose leaned back in the chair, with a strange flutter of hope and joy making her tremble. He came on, entered the room, and stood just within the threshold, looking sadly towards them, as they sat together in the red fire-light, upon his dishonored hearth.

"Father!" cried Hester, rising from her footstool, and going towards him as he remained motionless at the door.

"Do not go," he said, laying his hand upon her arm ; "do not leave us. You have ministered between us this long time past. Stay with us still."

"But speak to her," urged Hester ; "tell her that you forgive her too, freely."

She drew him on towards the hearth, her arm pressed about him with a tender force, until he stood opposite to Rose, and looked down upon her fair face, which in the red light had borrowed some of the bloom of her girlhood. Her blue eyes glistening with unshed tears, were raised to him in speechless entreaty ; and he met their gaze with an unspeakable pity in his own.

"Child," he said, in a voice of trouble, mingled with compassion. "I have just seen you pass through a woman's keenest sorrow."

"No, no," sobbed Rose, "no, no ! That was not my keenest sorrow. I shall soon go to her. I am going to die."

"Yes," he said, still looking down upon her with a strange tenderness.

"Oh!" she cried, with a pitiful wail in her feeble voice; "if I could only do something to atone for it, to make you believe that I love you! I was such a silly weak creature; I did not know then how much better your love was than his. You did love me before I was so wicked, didn't you?"

"Love you!" he echoed.

"Yes, I know it," she continued, wringing her hands. "I knew it as soon as I had forsaken you. Don't think I was ever happy. He was kind, but every word he spoke was a reproach to me. I had a little child, but she scarcely belonged to me; I could not let her live with me, I never nursed her; we never played together, like little Hetty and I used to play together, just after you married me. Do you remember? Oh, that was so happy! I feel as if I had been in heaven once, and fallen down, down, down into a pit of darkness. Shall we know each other in heaven, do you think?"

"I think we shall," he answered.

"Is it better for me to die than to live?" she asked imploringly.

"God thinks it best," he said.

"If I had lived," she went on, "could you so have forgiven me that you could take me back again, quite back again to you, as your wife, whom you loved and trusted, as in the time before I deceived you. I don't think anybody could love you as I would. Oh, how I would wait and watch to please you! Could you have forgiven me so?"

"No," said John Morley, his whole heart yearning to wards her, yet knowing that it was her doom so plainly read upon her face, which made it possible for him to keep her under his roof during the short span still remaining to her of life. The complication which he had dreaded when he heard that Rose was living was already disentangled.

He would not be compelled to put her from him, against the softening of his own love and the urgent pleas of her penitence. He could see that a few weeks, or months it might be, remained, during which she could still be with him ; he could look upon her and listen to her beloved voice, without any wrong done to his own conscience and his sense of righteousness. It was a great boon from the God he had distrusted.

“ Child,” he said—and from that time he called her by no other name—“ I love you wondrously, and I thank God that He is going to call you home to Himself. I could not have taken you back living to my inmost heart, and to the wifehood which was your right once. But dying, I can shelter you here, within my own house, upon my own hearth, where Hester’s mother died many years ago. And in my heart of hearts I can cherish the memory of you, coming home at last, weary of your long exile and sin, comforted by my tenderness, and passing away under my protection. Give thanks, my poor child, that your probation on earth is nearly ended.”

Rose had lifted herself painfully and feebly from her chair, and stood opposite to him, listening with parted lips and beseeching eyes to his words, uttered in a voice of passionate affection. She could not altogether understand him yet, any more than she had done in those far-off times when he had seemed very high above her girlish comprehension. But she knew that he loved her and had forgiven her ; he would not banish her again from the home from which she had fled, being easily tempted. As a child, whose intelligence cannot grasp all the meaning of its own fault and the pardon given to it, hides its childish tears in the bosom of its mother, Rose stretched out her arms to her husband. He hesitated for a moment, a hesitation which she did not see, and then drew her towards him, and laid her head upon his breast.

CHAPTER LXXI.

CARL'S HOUR.

CARL was exactly twenty-four hours behind John Morley and Hester, on their rapid journey homewards. At Paris he learned, through an interpreter, that two such travellers had passed through the day before, and had gone on direct for England. The station-master at Little Aston informed him mysteriously that there was a rumor in the town of Mr. Morley and his daughter having taken possession of their house again, and that there was certainly a lady with them, whom people believed to be no other than Mrs. Morley herself. Carl's anxiety fell from him in a moment. Hester was safe and at home again! He could not give a thought either to Rose or her husband. Leaving his portmanteau upon the platform as a thing unworthy of his recollection, he rushed with precipitate headlong haste to John Morley's house, haggard, dusty, and travel-stained, with eyes dull for want of sleep, and tangled hair falling in disorder about his careworn face. There was no difficulty in gaining admission; the house-door could be opened from the outside by simply turning the handle. He could not stay to knock. He paused no longer at the closed door of John Morley's parlor, but flung it open and strode in, with all the irresistible impatience which had been kept in check so long.

It had not been an idle day for Hester. There was no servant in the house, and though Lawson's mother did her

best, and had been closely at work since the morning, many things had fallen to Hester's lot to do. Up stairs in Rose's drawing-room, sunny and pleasant, lay the dead form of the lonely little child, whose holidays had come too late to save her ; and Hester's gentle hands had given to the room an air of soft tender repose, well suited to the peacefulness of little Hester's slumbers. Mr. Waldron and Robert had been in during the day to look at her for the last time ; for to-morrow she was to be buried in a quiet churchyard a mile or two away from Little Aston, with John Morley and Grant alone to follow her to the grave. In the dark parlor below Rose had rested in the great chair upon her husband's hearth, waited upon by him with a marvellous carefulness and foresight. A singular and solemn satisfaction seemed to pervade the house. It was night again now ; almost the hour when Hester and her father had stolen in home the evening before. Rose was in bed and had fallen asleep calmly. John Morley was gone to his own chamber ; and Hester was alone in the parlor, watching the fire die out in the grate, and the light grow fainter about the crevices and corners of the walls. Robert had told her that Carl was gone to Burgundy in quest of her ; and she was taking time now to follow him in his journey with somewhat troubled thoughts. What would he do there, in that remote little town, where nobody knew a word of English ? How could he find out what had become of them ? Would it come into his mind that the *cure* might understand Latin, and could communicate with him in that language ? Or would he wander about disconsolate and perplexed, seeking traces of her, and being unable to discover them ? Of course it could not be for long ; but she felt very much disturbed for him. How greatly he would be grieved that the little child had died while he was absent !

Hester's thoughts had reached this point when Carl made his abrupt entrance. He did not know what or whom he had expected to find beyond the closed door of John Morley's parlor. But he was not at all prepared to come upon Hester sitting all alone in the dim firelight, surrounded by the hush and stillness of a house which he had almost expected to find full of stir and tumult. It was several months since he had seen her, and the thought of her had grown almost a mocking and haunting fancy. Until very recently he had lived on in the belief that she was dwelling in some hiding-place very near to him, and that he might chance to cross her path any hour of any day. For the last few days he had been in eager pursuit of her, and had lost her like a shadow. Now she sat in the dusky light, looking into the embers, but starting to her feet the instant that he strode into the room, and seeming ready to take flight again. He forgot that no word of love had ever crossed his lips to meet Hester's ear. She belonged to him by right of his great love and his great anxiety. He clasped her passionately in his arms, and laying his head down upon hers, was speechless in the presence of his great joy.

"Carl," said Hester, lifting her hand to his face with one of the sweetest caresses a girl can give, "I am safe, I am come back. My father and I are at home again."

She made no effort to withdraw herself from his encircling arms, or to affect a maidenly reserve. Presently Carl released her himself, only keeping her hand in his, as they stood side by side on the hearth, and he looked down upon her eagerly and with restrained delight. The smouldering fire shot up a friendly little blaze, whose light played about her delicate face, now tinged with a soft flush. She trembled a little; her fingers quivered in his clasp; the breath came fluttering through her parted lips.

He could not break the delicious silence which had fallen upon them. Any words of his would be poor indeed compared to it.

"Carl," faltered Hester, in a tremulous voice, "little Hester is dead!"

He understood what she told him; he even felt a passing pain at hearing that the child had died so soon; but it only gave another touch like the unison note in music, to his perfect happiness. The tears shone upon Hester's long eyelashes; and he bent down and kissed them away.

"You know I love you," he said, in a tone half of apology and half of appropriation.

"Yes, I know," whispered Hester, her eye-lids closed as he had left them, when his lips had been laid against them.

"And you love me?" he said.

"Yes, I love you," she whispered again.

"Hester," he said, with a man's quick jealousy, "look me in the face, and tell me that you never loved anybody but me."

"How could I?" she asked, raising her eyelids but a little, and keeping her eyes upon the ground. "You know how few people I have ever seen. You, and Grant, and—"

"Robert Waldron," he added, as she paused. "Yes; I understand; I know. I had no chance against a man like him. But then why did you not accept him, Hester? Only a few people. like your father, and me, and those who believe that there are many better and nobler and greater things than wealth, only we should have thought you had sacrificed the higher for the lower. He loved you as passionately, nearly as purely, as I do. You are free to change yet. You may leave me, and I will not

utter a reproach. You will be very grand, very rich ; and he said once to me that you were born for such a lot as he can give you. I am, compared to him, a poor man, and must be always poor. I have not even a home to offer you yet. I wish I had not kissed you, Hester. I beg your pardon for taking you in my arms. It was my surprise which overpowered me. Good heavens ! why do you neither speak nor look at me ? ”

She had been standing beside him as he poured out his rapid words, perfectly motionless, with her eyes still bent upon the ground. The instinctive coquetry of a woman who is sure she is beloved, was playing about her heart, and teaching her the innocent artifices which go far in befooling men. She let him run on in his jealous outpouring without interposing a glance or a word ; but when he stopped, she lifted up her eyes to his face, with a glance in them which he could not misunderstand.

“ How foolish you are, Carl ! ” were the words she uttered.

“ Then you never loved anybody but me ? ” he persisted.

“ Never ! ” she repeated, tightening her fingers about his hand.

Carl was afraid of stirring, lest she should take her hand from his, and sit down apart from him, and whenever she moved he held her more closely. The small flame died away, and the room grew very dark indeed, with no light except that which came through the open door from the lamp in the old house-place. They had said but very little to one another, when a clear, shrill, foreign voice caused Carl to start violently.

“ Mademoiselle Hester, my angel,” said Madame Lawson, “ I must run away to my house for a little half-hour. Is there anybody talking with you, my little one ? ”

"It is only Lawson's mother," whispered Hester. "I must go out to her for a minute."

She was away for several minutes, and came back with the lamp in her hand. Then Carl sighed a profound sigh. The exquisite moment was gone, and could never return. Yet he had not time to mourn over it ; for though Hester seated herself in her own chair, she did not forbid him to stretch himself upon the hearth-rug at her feet, where her downcast eyes could not fail to fall upon him.

"Oh, Hester !" he cried, with a sudden sorrow coming across his joy, "so that little child is dead ! If I had not found you again, my dear love ; if you had been altogether lost to me, little Hester would have been dearer to me than any one else in the world. Do you know that she loved you very dearly, and pined to see you once again ? If you had but been at home in time to see her !"

"I did see her. She died in my arms," said Hester, in a sorrowful voice.

"God bless you, my Hester !" answered Carl.

"Let me tell you all about it," she said, looking down shyly upon his radiant face, for he could not keep his grief in mind while he was gazing up at her. "My father and Rose are reconciled to one another !"

She told him the whole story in low, quiet, timid tones, with fitful blushes and tears, which she did not wish him to see, and which he appeared not to notice. He did not interrupt her, listening in a rapture and reverie of love, which made him willing to lie there for hours, hearing no sound but her dear voice, and seeing nothing but her dear face. Madame Lawson's little half-hour proved to be a very long one ; but neither of them was conscious of its length.

CHAPTER LXXII.

BROUGHT TO LIGHT.

MADAME LAWSON, who was prone to avoid the daylight, which she declared not worthy of its name in England, proceeded homewards in the dusk, without meeting with any molestation. She had not paid her son and the garret any visit since the return of John Morley and Hester the night before ; and Lawson had failed to come down to his workroom, where indeed he had been but little during the last three months, though Mr. Waldron had continued to pay him and his mother the same wages he had formerly received from his master. Madame experienced no anxiety on his account. The affection existing between them was easy and cool ; and was made pleasant by the natural amiability of the light-hearted old woman. She knew her son to be quite capable of taking care of himself, and of making himself happy by means of his favorite drug. It had never troubled her that he should indulge in the use or abuse of opium. All men must have their little vice to keep them virtuous, was her equivocal maxim ; and she was perfectly content that her son's should be so harmless, and give so little trouble. Was not Milord Waldron a hundred times more interesting for that little fault of his ? When that poor little Madame Rose was gone to the good God, people would see ! Had not she beheld with her own eyes Monsieur Morley carrying him as tenderly as if he had been a woman, and leaning

over him with untiring solicitude, until he recovered. Oh, yes! *Cela saute aux yeux.*

She ascended the long flight of stairs briskly, feeling nearly equal to the difficult feat of singing as she mounted. No light whatever glimmered through the numerous chinks in the door, by which the fresh air was apt to find inconvenient admission. Good! Her son was gone to bed; and there would be nothing to do but to look round, and perhaps say her rosary, for she had had very little time to attend to her soul of late. She lifted the latch, and entered the dark room, humming a merry little song. Probably her son had left the match-box and the lamp upon the table, and she groped her way to it, stumbling against her *chaufferette*, which was in her way, and muttering a *malheur* against it. Her fingers feeling about the small table came in contact with something cold, clammy, and motionless. She laid her hand upon it, and found it was a hand, which neither stirred, nor grew warm at her close touch. Another movement in the dark of her groping fingers brought them to the bowed head of her son, with the cold damp brow resting upon the table. Then she shook him, and called loudly into his ear; but he did not answer. The next moment she felt sure that he was dead.

Lawson's mother sat down in the dark to think, not caring to light a candle now. She was a foreigner in a foreign land; and only knew three persons to whom she could communicate this horrible surprise. If she were to rush down stairs screaming, and making an alarm, she would have all the neighbors crushing into her room, to whom she could say nothing, and who could say nothing to her. She was sorry for her son; and a few tears stole down her smooth old face unseen by any eye. But how did she know what the laws of England would require of her? It was possible, that being a stranger or of a different religion,

they might demand the revenge of justice from her. Oh, that she had never quitted Burgundy ! What would become of her now ? What was she to do ?

After a few minutes' very troubled reflection, she decided that she could do nothing but go and tell Hester. Rose was asleep ; and Robert Waldron's residence she did not know. She raised herself slowly and with difficulty, as if old age had given her its first unkind touch. It seemed necessary now to lock the garret-door, lest any intruder should go in ; and with trembling fingers she took the key out of the wards within, and put it into the key-hole on the outside. She had not lighted a lamp, or looked round her room, and she left it in undisturbed quiet and darkness. Then she went down the long, narrow staircase slowly, and out into the court, and down the street, with her terrible story. It was a black shadow creeping across the glorified hour of Carl and Hester's betrothal.

Lawson's mother was about to enter John Morley's house, when a man who had been loitering on the opposite pavement, strode quickly across the road, and stopped her. She started with a half-uttered shriek, but Robert Waldron's voice quickly pacified her alarm.

"Good evening, Madame," he said ; "I was waiting here to see you coming out, or going in. How are they all to-night ?"

"Oh, Milord Waldron !" she cried, clinging to him entreatingly ; "come with me, come ! He is dead, my son Jean ! You know my son ? I come from finding him dead and cold, and I said I must go and tell Hester. But you will come, is it not so, Milord Waldron ?"

"Calm yourself," said Robert, in a soothing tone. "Certainly I will return with you, Madame. Tell me your story tranquilly as we walk along. Did you say your son was dead ?"

He walked up the street beside her, listening to her breathless and incoherent account ; and thinking she was very probably mistaken, and that Lawson's drugged sleep was only a little more profound than usual. On the ground-floor of the house he procured a light, and went on up the stairs which he had so often trodden for Hester's sake. He entered the room, and stood still for a moment to look about him. Lawson was sitting in the same chair and place where Hester had found him the night before, but his face was buried upon his arms on the table. Robert put the light down beside him, and touched his hand. There was no doubt that he was dead. A faint scent of landanum pervaded the room, and the box which had held his favorite drug lay open and empty at his feet.

There was a shock to Robert Waldron's sensitive temperament in this discovery, which formerly would have made him eager to throw upon some one else the uncomfortable burden. But a great change, a new birth, had been effected in him. He touched the dead hand again solemnly and reverently ; and then turned to the forlorn old woman, who stood at his side, trembling from head to foot.

"Yes," he said, gently, "yes. Your poor son is dead. But be comforted ; I will take care of you. He must have died sleeping ; he did not suffer much, and he was no longer young. He was not many years younger than you, Madame."

"I was seventeen when he was born," answered his mother, wiping her eyes somewhat needlessly. "Oh, Milord Waldron, send me back to Burgundy. I wish you would carry me back to Burgundy at once."

"You shall go," he said. "I will send you back as soon as possible. But now you must take a note for me to the doctor. You know Mr. Grant's house ?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" she replied eagerly. "I will run ; and then must I come back here

"No," said Robert, seeing how much she dreaded it ; "you may go to Hester ; but do not tell her a word—not one word—to-night."

Lawson's mother did not delay her departure and Robert was soon left alone in the room with the dead man. He scarcely knew why he had not gone himself for Grant ; and yet at the first moment of discovery it had seemed wrong to abandon the room again with its solitary and lifeless occupant, and he could not ask the frightened mother to stay in it. It was cold and dark. The hidden face of the corpse was something appalling. Robert shivered as he looked round him, and his memory grew very busy with his past visits here. Of all the places in the world, this poor garret was the one where he had seen Hester oftenest. And now in her stead there was a silent corpse, whose face he could not see, and whom he shrank from touching.

He looked, however, more steadfastly at the dead man, and saw that there had floated to the bare floor at his feet several sheets of paper, closely covered with writing. Robert stooped to gather them together, and carried them to the light. They were written in English, and could not be any special communication to his mother. Rather, no doubt, they were intended as some explanation of his deed. The poor wretch might have destroyed himself intentionally, and these lines would give his reason.

Standing at the other side of the table, with Lawson's corpse opposite to him, Robert Waldron put the scattered leaves together, and read their narrative. The first page was dated nearly four months back, on the night when John Morley fled from Little Aston ; and the rest had been written at various times since, sometimes only a few words being inserted in trembling characters, while at others the

writing was clear and firm, and proceeded smoothly, as if the writer had found pleasure in his task.

“To-night I, Jean Lawson, begin to write my confession, which will clear all other persons of blame concerning the events which have happened in my master’s house. Nobody will ever know how I have loved Hester. She has been my daughter, my queen, my goddess. I remember her mother, my master’s wife, whose name was Elinor, coming into my workroom one day. She carried a tiny, white creature in her arms, and she said, ‘Lawson this is my little girl, and I wish everybody in the world to love my baby.’ She smiled upon me like an angel; and I made a vow on the bended knees of my soul, that that little child should be dearer to me than any other creature in heaven or earth. After that my master’s wife died.

“My master was too much wrapt up in his grief to take notice of his young child. He left her in the hands of a careless nurse, and I used to hear the baby’s cries up into my workroom. Then I would run down and carry her away with me, and the nurse was content enough. I made her a cradle of an old box, which I swung to the beams by ropes, and there the baby slept sometimes, while I sang and hammered away at my work. She soon learned to love the red and gold bindings, and, as soon as she was old enough she would sit for hours at the end of the press, watching me lay on the gold leaf, and color the margins. I taught her the A B C.

“My master was getting rich very fast. Well, that was good; that was what I wanted. There was not much spent in the house; and every year we put by a good large sum. I worked early and late, and never asked for more wages. Other masters came and said, I will give you twice, three times as much, but I never dreamt of leaving John Morley. We were gathering a *dot* for Hester, that

she might be rich, and marry well. She was seven years old ; I was forty-three ; and my master was thirty-five. We both worked hard and spent little. Good ! she would be very rich by the time when we must look out for a husband.

“ If I shut my eyes now I see Hester again, as she was when she was seven years old. She began to take thought for her father, for the house, for me. Already she was a little woman. Sometimes she laughed, and made me laugh ; but she was never merry and mischievous like other children. She had grown up too much with elderly people, who were always grave and often unhappy. But the child was not unhappy, that I swear. There was no truth in that plea of my master's for bringing another woman into his wife's place.

“ About this time I began to see Hester's mother, whether in vision or reality I cannot tell. But she came now and then, a faint, bright, thin appearance, as of shining mist, with her face in it, and sometimes a hand, with the finger pointing. I saw it as often by day as by night. Hester could never see it, though she would go so near as to touch the shining mist. I did not know whether to like this appearance or not ; but I grew so accustomed to it, that I always worked better when it was there. Moreover it helped me. If I doubted what device to work upon my binding, the finger pointed out one, which always proved to be the best. I suppose nobody in all the country round could do work like mine. But if I had taken higher wages from my master that shining cloud would have vanished away. I have seen Hester, in her play, touch the shadowy hand without knowing it.

“ But one day I went down to my master's room with some finished work, and there was a girl with him, a laughing, giddy, flaunting girl, who was standing close

beside him. I felt all at once a horrible dread and hatred creep through me. Something said, either in my ear, or only in my heart, 'That woman will be John Morley's second wife !' They had not seen me, and I stole away with the cold sweat upon my face. After that the appearance was as of a woman in great sorrow, who looked at me with trouble in her eyes. But what could I do ?

"It was a dreadful misfortune to happen. If my master had died, there was a little fortune for Hester, and I would have managed to carry on the business for her. But another wife, and other children, may be ! I saw Hester about to become a step-child, a forlorn little drudge, forgotten and neglected by her father.

"I loathed that woman ; I abhorred her. I hated the jingle of her piano, and her loud singing, which reached me up in my quiet room, and scared away the shining vision. Then the money kept flying like sparks from an anvil. She must have her silks and satins and laces, and a drawing-room, and more servants. My master was fooled by her. I saw Hester would come to poverty. She was not unkind to her ; she even made believe to love her, and whenever the child came to see me, we heard her shrill, hateful voice calling, 'Hester, Hetty !' Perhaps it was because she no longer played there, that her mother never came to my workroom.

"But I saw her once again, and I told Hester of it. I saw her sitting by my fire, with her head bowed down upon her hands, as one in very sore trouble of mind.

"Then my master's second wife brought disgrace upon him.

"I thought I could not hate her more than I had done, but I hated her a hundred-fold more after that. I saw my master the night after she left him go into Hester's room in the dead of the night, ready to take her life and his own.

I had staid in the house for very fear of that, to save the child. I remember striking a boy a heavy blow for saying that Hester was her daughter.

"Ten years or so after that I saw the man who had been our ruin, prowling about our house, and I stole back to my room for one of the press-pins. He walked up and down, with his head bent, until he came close to where I stood in the entrance of the side-passage, and I struck him, as I would have set my heel upon any venomous snake. He fell in an instant, and I hurried home. My mother was come to live with me then. I cleaned the press-pin with ashes, and carried it back the next morning. I was not altogether sorry that I had missed killing him.

"But I missed killing her, too. My hand betrayed me a second time. It came about in this way. I was staying late on the Saturday night, and my master was gone out of the house, when all at once I heard the old jingle of the piano coming up to my room. I knew it could be no one else save her. I had waited for this hour many years. I took my press-pin again, and crept down stairs through the old printing rooms into the other part of the house. The drawing-room door was ajar, and I looked in. She was sitting at her piano, with her back towards me, and she did not hear me go in. I thought she was dead after I struck her; and I felt glad that I had revenged Hester, my master, and myself. Then I went home.

"Hester came in just now. They are come back, her and her father, and are going down to their own house, though they know she is there. I shall never enter it again. Sometimes I think it would be well for me to go, as my mother wishes me, to Burgundy; but then I have no money. We are all poor; my master, Hester, and myself. I am writing this to explain to my master, and to

any other persons he may think fit to show it to, how all these things have come about.

“ I did everything for the sake of Hester, who has been as the apple of my eye ever since I saw her first, a small, white creature, in her mother’s arms.”

CHAPTER LXXIII.

CHECKMATED.

ROBERT WALDRON read the papers before him with an aching heart. Where was his punishment to cease? At what other points in his career was the ever-widening circle of his early sin to reach him? He had never suspected Lawson's enmity all these years; and now it had wrought so strongly, being baffled and thrown back upon itself, that it had driven him to suicide. The sound of Grant's foot upon the stairs was welcome, yet when he entered, Robert could not look upon him in the face. He only spoke in a broken and smothered voice.

"The poor fellow has destroyed himself," he said.

"No," answered Grant, almost cheerfully, "I have been expecting this any time for the last twelve months. He consulted me for a heart-disease, for which he was using opium, the only relief he could have. I knew he could not last long; but it is possible he may have met with a little excitement which hastened the end. This is no case of suicide."

"Thank God!" cried Robert. Grant's words were an untold relief to him. If they only proved correct when he came to examine the man, he would take heart, and go forward bravely to meet whatever lay beyond him in the future.

"You had better go to my house, and wait for me there," said Grant, and Robert took his advice willingly. Grant

followed him in the course of an hour, and verified his statement. Lawson's opium box had been emptied, but that had not caused his death, which was the result of an access of the disease, long anticipated by them both. Robert gave him his confession to read, and Grant ran through it rapidly.

"Strange!" he said. "Strange that this never occurred to me, at least! I felt reluctant to lay the sin at John Morley's door; yet I missed the clue from not having known Lawson long enough. Shall we make this paper public?"

"To what end?" asked Robert. "Scarcely any person besides ourselves knows anything of the past. It was written for John Morley, and we will give it to him. Let him do what he likes with it."

"And the mother?" suggested Grant.

"I will send her back to Burgundy," he answered; "a small pension will make her happy. Strange tales will she have to tell of English life!"

He smiled a little sadly, but went home with a heart the lighter because it had missed having a great increase to its burden. Early the next morning he presented himself at John Morley's door, which was opened to him by Lawson's mother, her face somewhat troubled, and the fine wrinkles about her eyes strongly marked, but bearing no light of malice or cunning about them.

"Well," was all she could utter, "my son?"

"He is dead," said Robert; "you have not spoken a word to Hester?"

"Not one word!" replied madame. "The young curé was with her when I returned; alone, monsieur, absolutely alone! These English manners do not please me. Bah! The little one permitted him to kiss her before he went.

I thought Milord Waldron will be discontent ; but they did not see me. Then my son is veritably dead ? ”

“ You shall go home to Ecquemonville at once,” replied Robert. “ I will send my servant with you to start from Folkestone ; and I intend to allow you a small pension.”

“ Seigneur ! ” cried the old woman, clapping her hands together, “ that is good ! I shall live again in the sunshine, and sing my little songs to those who love them ! He was not a bad son, monsieur, and I grieve for him ; but it was very *triste* here in England, and he was morose, sombre. If mademoiselle marries the curé, I shall have no more pleasure in England. Wherefore do you not persist in marrying her ? ”

Robert made no answer, for Hester was passing through the entrance, and came forward to speak to him. There was a new light in her eyes, and a color on her grave face, which he understood well. He gave her the packet for her father, and then went away, for the hour was drawing near when the quiet funeral of his little child would start from John Morley's door.

It was the evening of the same day that Carl, who had been walking with Robert through the park towards Aston Court, happened to encounter Miss Waldron on his return. They met almost upon the spot where he had first spoken of his love for Hester. He recollected it distinctly, and her conduct afterwards, which had effected his separation from his first church. But Carl's charity was of the order which hopeth all things, endureth all things, and never faileth. She had once been his friend, and to her he had often poured out his heart, when it was overcharged. A halo was about her still, for the sake of past times, and, let it be owned, for the sake of the hopeless love she had borne for him, which had perhaps been the real spring

of all her after unkindness. He approached her with an outstretched hand, which she feigned not to see.

"Mr. Bramwell," she said, coldly, "you have taken your own course, I believe. I warned you against Hester Morley; I warned you in ample time, but you followed your own rash and unregenerate nature. I trust you may never repent of it."

"I never shall repent of it," answered Carl, warmly. "Thank God, Hester will be my wife as soon as I have a home ready for her! But let us be friends again, Miss Waldron, though I neglected your advice. Your brother and I are friends at last; your father loves me and Hester; do not let there be coldness and estrangement between us. We may see each other often. When we do meet, let us meet as friends."

"There is no unfriendliness on my part," said Miss Waldron, frigidly. "With due consideration of the difference in our position, I am quite willing to meet you on a proper footing. Hester also. I have shown her many kindnesses, and no conduct of hers can efface the remembrance of them from my memory. You may give my best wishes to her, Mr. Bramwell."

She walked on with a stately step, leaving Carl in as uncomfortable and irritated a frame of mind as was possible to him. But her heart was swelling with mortification and disappointment. She could not bear to think of Hester married to Carl, eloquent and popular, with a growing fame, while she remained single and obscure in the retirement of Little Aston. She ran through the list of chances which, in the pride of her youth and position, she had cast away; and she sighed bitterly over them. Only one remained to her; and that was David Scott. True, he was very deaf, so deaf that she could not whisper gentle hints into his ear; but he looked at her very significantly. He

was a good preacher, moreover, and sooner or later would make a mark, as Dr. Hervey assured her. With her aid, what height might he not attain? She gained her room, and deliberated long upon the question. Then she reached out her desk, selected the paper which bore the crest of her family, and wrote the following epistle:

"MY VERY DEAR FRIEND,—Though our friendship has reached a point when I might well address you by your Christian name, my pen still refuses to write it. I feel as if I must receive your sanction for so endearing a familiarity. Yet David is a very dear name to me. I wonder if men are as susceptible to the dread of making too close advances as women like myself are? I can very well imagine that when a young man, however worthy, looks up to a woman who occupies a prominent position, either for her rank, her wealth, or her piety, he may say to himself, 'Ah! such a being is not for me!' The less worthy of your sex are more adventurous. Under a pretext of friendship Carl Bramwell advanced so near to me that he had well nigh gained his point, had not the snare been broken, and I had escaped. How thankful I am now that he did not win upon me by his specious eloquence! I never knew till of late the difference between real and fictitious merit. Since I have known you my eyes have been opened indeed! Your last letter lies before me: every word in it a precious and polished gem; they come from your heart to my heart.

"I wonder if you can understand that we are equals. If I possess advantages denied to you, on the other hand Providence has bestowed upon you gifts mysteriously withheld from me. I acknowledge this. Dear David, your intrinsic merit makes you too lowly in your own eyes. You could never be guilty of the presumption of Carl Bramwell; yet it would be no presumption in you. You are the true gold; he is only the glittering bauble. Oh, I am afraid you will misunderstand me! Shall I tear up this letter which I have written with a throbbing heart and tearful eyes? No. You may still be saying to yourself, 'Such a being is not for me!' You would be a help

indeed to me on the upward and onward path. How I should lean upon you! How I would assist you to the best of my poor abilities! My father has a great regard for you. He asked me—*me*—the other day, why you did not marry. I could give him no satisfactory reply. Shall I ever be able to do so?

"It would never strike your disinterested mind to inquire into my worldly circumstances. If I should ever marry without my father's approbation, I should even then be blessed with £500 a year in my own right. But my father has often urged me to select a partner for life, and leaves my choice unbiased. Until now I could not make up my mind. It is made up now. I shall marry but one being, or remain for ever single. If you wish to know his name, I will tell you in my next letter.

"Oh, I am very much afraid that you will misunderstand me! I shall await your reply in great agitation. Do not prolong it, my very dear friend. Send me but a word, a line, by the bearer.

"Yours for ever,

"SOPHIA W."

Miss Waldron was satisfied with her effusion, and slept soundly after it. In the morning she despatched her missive by a footman, who received orders that the carriage was to take him and his weighty packet to the lodgings of Mr. Scott, and wait until an answer was ready. She partly hoped that he would catch the hint, and return to her in the carriage; but only a short note was brought back. She opened it, and read it with unutterable emotions.

"DEAR MISS WALDRON,—I understand you quite well. Unluckily I am engaged to a cousin in Glasgow, who would not give me up, I am sure. I shall keep your letters as a mark of your esteem. Believe me,

"Yours faithfully,

"DAVID SCOTT."

David Scott was wise in his generation. No trouble disturbed his relations with his church ; and though Miss Waldron was distant, she was always deferential. He married his cousin in due time, and they were received as formal visitors at Aston Court. Miss Waldron continued to shed a bright and unwearied light upon the little church at Little Aston.

CHAPTER LXXIV.

LAST WORDS.

HESTER'S sorrow for Lawson was very real, but it hung over her present happiness only as a thin cloud shadows a bright sky. They told her that his sudden death had been long impending ; and though they did not show her the confession he had written, Carl said he had owned to being guilty of those acts of violence and revenge which they had all attributed to her father. Carl had still a few days to stay at Little Aston, days of a quiet but profound gladness ; and then he went back to his charge in London, whom he astonished by a happy and buoyant eloquence in his sermons which they had not remarked in them before.

Rose lingered through the winter, dying so slowly and peacefully that it could scarcely be called death—"the hours gliding by with down upon their feet." A gleam of her old light-heartedness returned now and then, with a pathetic beauty in it ; the feebleness of her smiles, and the faint ripple of laughter from her lips smote painfully upon John Morley's spirit. Yet he knew it was best for her to go. Some lives cannot blossom and bear fruit until they are transplanted into more genial climes. She was too weak a creature to work any work worthy of repentance, such as a stronger woman may do, who has fallen even lower than she had done. It was well for him to shield and cherish her, as she descended with slow, sure steps

down to the portal through which she must pass alone. But he could have done nothing else ; and he thanks God for the great boon granted to him.

"Are you very sorry that I must die?" she asked one day, with wistful eyes and voice, when her time was almost ended. "Would you wish me to live, and grow strong again?"

"No," he said, his heart swelling with great pity, yet truthful to her, for truth was kindest.

Rose turned away her face from him and the light, but he saw a quiver of pain tremble upon it.

"My child," he said, very tenderly, "there will be no sin there ; and 'sorrow and sighing shall flee away.' It is a good thing for you to be taken out of the world. But is there anything you desire, anything you can wish to ask of me, which you shrink from asking?"

"No," she answered, with a sob.

"Do you not wish," he continued, in a lower and more tender voice, "to see him, Robert, once more, before you die?"

"No," she repeated, opening her blue eyes, and looking into his face like a child ; "Why should I? I have almost forgotten him. He never comes into my thoughts now. Let Hester tell him, if she will, that I have forgotten him,—the best thing I can do."

It was but a few days after this, when he was watching her alone in the first quiet dawn of a spring morning, that she called him to her side, with a sharp, quick tone, which told him that the last moment was come. All the house was silent with that peculiar atmosphere of silence which comes with the night, but which is more felt during the solemn and irresistible approach of light to the world. John Morley was alone with the wife whom he had so passionately loved. He bent over her with a bitter pang

piercing him to the heart, yet with gratitude and courage. She raised her eyes to his for the last time.

"You forgive me fully," she whispered, "as fully as God forgives?"

"As fully as God forgives!" he repeated.

"Kiss me," she said, "kiss my lips, as you kissed my child when she was dying."

John Morley bent his face to hers, and laid a long, solemn, agonized kiss upon her lips; and when he lifted up his head, he saw that she had gone from him forever.

Rose died early in March, and before the end of April John Morley and Hester left Little Aston altogether, taking with them but few of their poor household goods, except the great chair in which Hester's mother had died, the volumes Lawson had bound for her when she was a child, and John Morley's favorite books. Robert Waldron and Carl had chosen a house for them in London, and Annie had been there for a fortnight to superintend the furnishing of it. It was a sunny house, looking upon a square where the lime-trees were just opening their leaf-buds, and two or three chestnut-trees spreading their first broad leaflets to the spring light and breeze; a rural home compared to the gloomy decayed old house in Little Aston. Mr. Waldron had procured a situation for John Morley as librarian, with a salary of £300 a year; but this new house was suited to an income fully twice that sum. It was within a pleasant distance of Carl's chapel. The arrangements within were altogether those of a new household, consisting of other members besides Hester and her father. There was a room, still empty and unfurnished, which would make a good study by-and-by. Hester understood it very well, though nothing had been said to her on the subject. This was Carl's home, which she was to occupy a few months yet without him, out of regard to her father's new grief.

She would have time to grow at home in it, to give to it the impress of her own taste, to make it more and more ready for him to come to it ; and then—

The day after she and her father had entered their new dwelling, Robert Waldron called, and Hester went to receive him alone. She had not seen him since the morning she had stood beside him, looking down on the sweet pale face of his dead child. He appeared much older, but there was an expression of goodness and earnestness upon his face which had not been seen there in former times. He smiled gravely but tenderly upon her, as she advanced to meet him with some shyness and hesitation in her manner. The hand she extended to him bore his ring, which she had slipped on her finger unthinkingly as she came across it in her unpacking. Robert kept her hand in his, looking down upon it, and upon her face, with an air of mingled pain and pleasure.

"Thank you for wearing my ring, dear Hester," he said, "Carl knows of it."

"I have not told him," she answered, with a hasty blush.

"But I have," he continued, smiling ; "he knows it is only a love which might have been, and he does not grudge me the shadow when he has the substance. Hester, I have become a member of his church."

"I am very glad," she said, with tears in her clear, frank eyes.

"We shall be friends," Robert went on, "we three, as long as we live. Carl will let me come here as familiarly as if I were his brother and yours ; and I shall be here very often. Do you know, dear friend, that I have been invited by my father's old constituency to represent them in Parliament ? I shall live in London more than half my time, and so not be very far from you. Do you think my visits will be a trouble to your father ?"

"I am sure they will not, after a while," said Hester.

"Does he grieve very much for Rose?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered; "but not as he did before. He is cheerful now, and takes a good deal of interest in everything that happens to us both. He has been all over this new house with me, noticing everything, and he is more than content; he is glad to be away from the old place, and to be beginning a new life. It is a new life to him."

"Did she leave no message for me?" said Robert, after a pause.

"None," she replied, "only that she had almost forgotten you, and that it was best so."

"Poor Rose! poor little Hetty!" he said, as if speaking to himself only. "Yet indeed I was little more than a boy."

He could not altogether relinquish his old plea, which had possessed truth enough to give him some solace in former times. He looked back from a calm height upon all the past, and could trace the hard and crooked paths into which he had strayed. He had escaped from them, but the mire and clay clung to him even yet, and he stood solitary upon the height he had gained at last. "Hester," he said, "my father promises himself to be present at your wedding in the autumn."

"And Miss Waldron?" exclaimed Hester, in alarm.

"No, not Miss Waldron," answered Robert, smiling; "certainly not. Do you think my sister would come? No; my father and I will be there, if you will give us leave."

"Yes, come," said Hester, heartily; and then, remembering herself, was covered with confusion so pretty and delightful, that Robert Waldron could scarcely restrain a sigh of bitterness and regret.

"And poor old Lawson's mother?" said Hester, in a tone of questioning

"I had a letter from her the other day," answered Robert; "she is enchanted to be at home again in Burgundy. Hester, I have the mark of Lawson's blow yet; I shall carry it to my grave."

He lifted the hair which fell over his temples, and pushed it back. There was a seam and scar still upon the skin, and, as he said, it would be there till he died. It was but an emblem and a symbol of the inner and spiritual wound, healed indeed, and with as much of the pain taken away as could ever be removed in this life; but a wound still, a blemish, a brand upon the beauty of his future life. Carl had come into the room as he spoke, and looked with Hester upon it; and she, putting her hand into his with a tender clasp, bent forward and kissed the scar.

THE END.

